H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Seth Offenbach. *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam.* New York: Routledge, 2019. viii + 220 pp. $155.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-367-20954-4.

Reviewed by Marcus M. Witcher (University of Central Arkansas)

Published on H-War (March, 2020)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Seth Offenbach's *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* argues that Vietnam, far from uniting the conservative movement, actually caused it to fracture, enter a stage of intellectual malaise, and ultimately evolve to incorporate social conservatism. Offenbach details the evolution of conservatism from a vibrant intellectual movement in the early 1960s—consisting of traditional conservatives and libertarians—to "negative conservatism" in the early 1970s, which provided the opportunity for the conservative movement to incorporate evangelical and Catholic conservatives. Offenbach's major contribution is to challenge, and provide nuance to, the claim that anticommunism united the conservative movement. Instead, he demonstrates that conservatives and libertarians disagreed vehemently over Vietnam and that the war fractured and then transformed the movement. Furthermore, Offenbach joins a growing number of scholars who are interested in the vast diversity of ideas and goals among conservatives. To his credit, Offenbach takes conservatives and their ideas seriously and he has produced an excellent study that details how the Vietnam War transformed the conservative movement.

Offenbach argues that conservatism in 1964 was an intellectually vibrant movement. Although a majority of Americans rejected Barry Goldwater's vision for the United States in 1964, there is no doubt that Goldwater and other conservative elites offered new ideas and a unique vision of modernity. After Goldwater's defeat, conservatives, many of whom did not see Vietnam as the most important venue in the Cold War, found themselves supporting President Lyndon B. Johnson's war in Vietnam—even if they criticized what they saw as Johnson's unwillingness to achieve victory in the conflict.

Both conservatives and libertarians initially supported the war, seeing it as necessary to achieve victory against the spread of global communism. Even when libertarians began to protest the draft in Vietnam in 1967, conservatives supported an initiative to end the draft but still wage the war. The inconsistency of this position, however, soon emerged and in 1969 at Young Americans for Freedom's national convention the tensions between libertarians and conservatives erupted into outright schism. This led leading libertarians, such as Murray Rothbard, to insist that "the conservative movement had no place for libertarians" (p. 99). The fractures created by the Vietnam War alienated libertarians and pushed many of them out of the movement. As a result, by 1970 the conservative movement was in a period of realignment—one that, according to Offenbach,

altered "the conservative movement's identity" (p. 86).

The Vietnam War, far from being a point of unity, proved to be a source of fracture for the conservative movement. From 1970 to 1973 conservatives increasingly focused on their opposition to the New Left, the antiwar protests, and what they viewed as the decline of American morality. According to Offenbach, "as the early 1970s progressed, there was a greater focus within conservative literature on morality, Christianity, and order within society" (p. 102). Conservative elites, who had been searching for new issues that could motivate and unite the fractured movement, found their issue in 1973 when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in ***Roe v. Wade***. As Offenbach details, the abortion issue "burst into the national political debates at precisely the right time for the right to rally against abortion rights" (p. 177).

Abortion, along with other "Archie Bunker" issues that conservative elites had long scorned, enabled them to unite the movement. Some conservative elites even realized that their focus on Vietnam had been self-defeating and that these new social issues offered conservatives the greatest opportunity "than at any time in two generations" (p. 147). Offenbach concludes that the fractures created during the Vietnam War between libertarians and conservatives enabled the conservative movement to capitalize on the emergence of culturally conservative issues. Thus the conservative movement was reenergized throughout the late 1970s with new ideas that enabled the formation of a stronger and more appealing (to voters) conservative movement. This renewed conservatism finally experienced electoral success in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan.

Offenbach draws on a rich and diverse source base. He consults the important conservative publications of the time including ***National Review***, ***Human Events***, and the ***Christian Science Monitor***. Likewise, he cites the manuscript collections and archives from across the country including the Hoover Institution Archives, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the LBJ Presidential Library, the Sterling Memorial Library, and the Chicago Historical Society. Offenbach also makes use of online archives including the Miller Center, the Reagan Library, and the Vietnam War Library. Finally, to round out his impressive evidentiary base, he draws on interviews with conservatives who lived through the turbulent 60s and 70s.

Offenbach's study is an important contribution to study of conservatism. He draws on the work of those who came before him but makes his own contribution. Offenbach should be praised for recognizing that the conservative movement has not always been reactionary and that conservatives have not always based their identity on what they were against. For example, he argues that during the 1960s "most of the movement was based on clear and new ideas and proposals" (p. 110). At other times, Offenbach demonstrates that conservatives framed their identity in opposition to the New Left. Even at times like this, though, when the movement was largely reactionary, Offenbach notes that many "conservative intellectuals bemoaned a malaise that bedeviled the movement" (p. 111). Throughout the book, he does an excellent job of detailing the divisions, fractures, and debates that took place in what was, and is, a diverse political and intellectual movement. In short, he takes conservative ideas seriously and for this he should be praised.

Although Offenbach's book is well done overall, it does have some small defects. The writing is a bit clunky at times, with Offenbach frequently using phrases such as "as mentioned" and "as discussed earlier," but overall, he is successful in delivering his narrative in a way that is engaging and effective. Offenbach also uses the New Right to label the entire conservative movement after 1974, whereas the New Right was one of many diverse strands of conservatism in the 1970s. It is also difficult to get a sense in chapter 3 how many

libertarians abandoned the conservative movement over Vietnam—an issue that Offenbach himself acknowledges. Furthermore, the book frequently could have been improved by the addition of one or two more examples to support his claims (in his defense, these examples may have been cut due to concerns over the length of the book).

Ultimately, Offenbach should be praised for detailing the effects that the Vietnam War had on the conservative movement. This is an important book for our present moment. Conservatism has been fundamentally changed since the election of President Donald Trump and it is more important than ever to take conservative ideas seriously. As Offenbach shows, conservatives have constantly been fighting over the meaning of conservatism and that fight is just as intense today as it was in the time that Offenbach analyzes. Just as conservatism in the early 70s became more focused on social and cultural issues, today it seems to be gravitating away from Reaganite conservatism toward a Pat Buchanan-style one that is more nationalistic and protectionist in nature. The debates of the 60s and 70s are strikingly similar to those that concern conservatives, and indeed, all Americans, today.