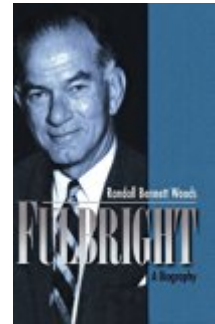


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Randall Bennett Woods. *Fulbright: A Biography*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xi + 711 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48262-2.

Reviewed by Walter L. Hixson (Department of History, University of Akron)
Published on H-Diplo (August, 1996)



J. William Fulbright and Postwar Internationalism

Randall Woods' *Fulbright: A Biography* is more than seven hundred pages long, yet it is hard to put down. Woods is not only a careful student of Fulbright's place in the history of U.S. foreign policy, but he is also a fellow Arkansan who understands Fulbright in the context of his place and time. There are no revelations here, but the exhaustive research, clear prose, and mature scholarship make this book the definitive account of Fulbright's life.

James William (but always Bill) Fulbright, the youngest of four children, was born April 9, 1905, to a well-to-do banking family in Fayetteville, Arkansas. A bright student and a fine athlete (Fulbright was a near scratch golfer into his sixties), Bill starred in football at the University of Arkansas, joined virtually every club on campus, and became student body president. He graduated at age nineteen with a degree in history.

Arguably the formative event in Fulbright's life was his selection as a Rhodes Scholar in 1924. The young man studied history and politics at Oxford, excelled in lacrosse, and emerged from his years abroad as a confirmed Atlanticist. Fulbright moved to Washington to be near Betty Williams, a Philadelphian who would become his wife of more than fifty years. After graduation from George Washington law school, Fulbright returned home to become president of the University of Arkansas at age thirty-four.

After being forced out of that office for political reasons, Fulbright got himself elected to Congress in 1942, where he became a member of the Foreign Affairs Com-

mittee. A bold young internationalist, Fulbright garnered immediate national attention by sponsoring the House resolution that would lead to the creation of the United Nations.

Fulbright launched his long Senate career in 1944 by defeating the man who had forced him out of the university presidency. Determined to assume a leadership role, Fulbright sponsored legislation creating the scholarship program that would bear his name for generations. Funded through the sale of wartime surplus abroad, the scholarship program placed the United States at the center of postwar intellectual and cultural exchange.

Following the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1946 elections, Fulbright stunned his Democratic colleagues—and established his well-deserved reputation as a maverick—by suggesting that Harry Truman ought to resign. Fulbright was trying to make a case for the parliamentary system, but Truman reviled him as an “overeducated Oxford S.O.B.”

Despite the rift Fulbright emerged, as Woods notes, “in the front rank of America's cold warriors” (p. 152). He embraced the Truman Doctrine as well as the Marshall Plan and worried about Soviet ability to exploit power vacuums in the postwar world. Fulbright endorsed U.S. intervention in Korea, but without enthusiasm, as his doubts about crusading American globalism began to emerge.

The actions of Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, let alone Joe McCarthy, reinforced those doubts.

The junior senator from Arkansas decried a national obsession with communism, which fueled Cold War militarization and overshadowed economic and cultural programs that he championed. With his rational, intellectual style, Fulbright could not abide the emotional anti-communism of Dulles, whom he judged “pompous, self-righteous, and inept” (p. 224).

By the time he became head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) in 1959—a position he would hold for twenty-five years, longer than anyone else in U.S. history—Fulbright was a staunch advocate of detente. It was a position from which he never wavered. To Fulbright, there simply was no alternative to seeking common ground with the other great powers, regardless of the ideological gulf.

John Kennedy came close to offering Fulbright the position of secretary of state, but the Arkansan lacked enthusiasm for the post. Fulbright knew himself well and relished his position as an independent thinker on foreign affairs. Briefed by the incoming administration on the proposed Bay of Pigs operation, Fulbright saw the potentially disastrous consequences and urged Kennedy to reject the plan. Ever after, Fulbright distrusted the Central Intelligence Agency.

Surprisingly, Fulbright sided with the hawks on the Cuban missile crisis, arguing that a blockade of the island was an insufficient response. Woods charges that Fulbright’s position would have led logically to nuclear war. It seems clear that Fulbright did not function at his best in times of crisis, where he was often caught off-stride. Fulbright’s strength was overall conceptualization of foreign policy. Following resolution of the missile crisis, Fulbright shepherded the limited nuclear test ban treaty through the Senate.

Alarmed by the militant chauvinism that Barry Goldwater embodied, Fulbright campaigned tirelessly for his former Senate majority leader, Lyndon Johnson. Warding off the Right Wing was one of Fulbright’s central aims in smoothing the path for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution in 1964. Fulbright supported containment in Vietnam, but failed to foresee the implications of the presidential blank check. Later, when it became clear that Johnson had deceived him about the incidents in the gulf, Fulbright was livid.

While Fulbright sharply opposed escalation in Vietnam, it was the 1965 Dominican intervention that “destroyed his relationship with Lyndon Johnson” (p. 385). When the SFRC chairman then called his publicized hear-

ings on the war, the rift became permanent. Johnson labeled the Arkansan an isolationist, ostracized him from White House functions, and ordered FBI surveillance of Fulbright and other doves.

Fulbright resented attacks on his patriotism and civil liberties, but bore them with courage. He condemned the “McCarthy-type crusade” against war critics and stepped up his campaign against militarization, both in Vietnam and as a generalized phenomenon in American culture. After receiving a cool reception before a packed house at the National War College, Fulbright condemned those who wrapped themselves in the flag while charging proponents of legitimate dissent with undermining soldiers in the field.

The Fulbright hearings, his own statements, and popular books such as *The Arrogance of Power* (1966) made Fulbright a critical voice in a tumultuous time. He was routinely praised, condemned, and threatened with his life. With the assistance of key aides such as Carl Marcy and Seth Tillman, the encouragement of intellectual compatriots such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Walter Lippmann, and the constant support of his wife, Fulbright never compromised his views.

The Arkansan’s attitudes on race did change, but the process was painfully slow. Fulbright’s resistance to racial progress was undoubtedly his greatest failure. Woods handles the issue well, beginning with the blunt statement that Fulbright was indisputably a racist. His racism was not visceral, but rather a product of ignorance and lack of empathy for the African American experience.

Fulbright voted and filibustered against virtually every civil rights reform that came before him in the 1950s and 1960s. His northern intellectual friends liked to dismiss the Arkansan’s voting record as acts of political necessity, but Woods persuasively argues that Fulbright voted his conscience.

Race relations and other domestic issues, however, were secondary to foreign policy for Fulbright, as they were for Richard Nixon. Fulbright hoped to work with Nixon to end the carnage in Southeast Asia before realizing, to his horror, that the new president would take American involvement to irrational extremes. The punishing bombing, revelations of U.S. atrocities, and the destruction of Cambodia sickened Fulbright.

Fulbright abandoned his former advocacy of an enclave strategy in favor of simply getting out. Unlike

Nixon and Henry Kissinger, with whom he established a close relationship, Fulbright insisted that, in the new era of detente, withdrawal from Vietnam would have little impact on American foreign policy. Working with Mike Mansfield, George McGovern, and other doves, Fulbright drove the legislation that finally reined in the imperial presidency, a process that culminated in the War Powers Act in 1973.

The long campaign against the war left Fulbright, at age sixty-eight, exhausted. In 1974 he mounted an uninspired reelection campaign in which popular Arkansas governor Dale Bumpers soundly defeated him. Americans were sick of Vietnam and anything or anyone associated with it. African Americans and proponents of Israel, which Fulbright condemned for refusing to disgorge lands taken in the 1967 Six-Day War, voted against him in droves.

Fulbright had already sensed that a new political order was passing him by. He lamented the “new breed of legislator” who aimed “not to convey an idea but to project an image” (p. 682). Such a style was foreign to the maverick intellectual from Arkansas. Fulbright remained in Washington but no longer commanded the spotlight. In a moving ceremony in May 1993, another former Rhodes Scholar from Arkansas, President Bill Clinton, pinned the Medal of Freedom on the old statesman’s chest. Fulbright suffered a massive stroke later that year and died in 1995.

Woods’ analysis of Fulbright is sharp and balanced, drawing the appropriate contrast between the forward-thinking philosopher of foreign affairs and the backsliding segregationist. Ultimately, Woods perceives Ful-

bright as a pragmatic intellectual striving for a reasoned international order.

Woods’ focus on Fulbright’s racism and the long campaign against the Vietnam War overshadows perhaps Fulbright’s most significant legacy. His sponsorship of the UN resolution, the foreign scholarship program, and his campaign against militarism reflected his belief that education, cultural dissemination, and rational discourse among nations were the building blocks of a stable international order.

Taking the analysis a step further, Fulbright’s career reveals just how devoid of meaning and politically driven is the worn-out Cold War dichotomy between internationalism and non-intervention—or, more pejoratively, “isolationism.” In traditional Cold War discourse both policymakers and scholars have found it difficult to view these forces as anything other than opposites. Fulbright demonstrates that the dichotomy was more apparent than real.

Fulbright was an internationalist, but he believed that educational and cultural exchange and non-intervention should anchor American foreign policy. Such an approach, he believed, would serve the national interest, be consistent with American ideals, and check the rampant militarization fostered by the Cold War. These worthy goals, brought to life in Randall Woods’ fine biography, represent Fulbright’s most enduring legacy.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Walter L. Hixson. Review of Woods, Randall Bennett, *Fulbright: A Biography*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=558>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.