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Michael H. Hunt. *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. ix + 146 pp. $18.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-5023-9; $11.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-1604-4.

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For the scholar, the Vietnam War presents a labyrinth of motives and actions, many of which have long been approached with speculation rather than certainty. For this slim volume Michael Hunt, an Asian scholar whose previous work has dealt largely with Chinese-American foreign policy matters, draws upon both American and Vietnamese sources, some only recently made available, in an attempt to explain how the United States came to be drawn into the conflict in Southeast Asia. The result is not so much a new set of revelations as it is a reaffirmation of the view that the United States moved into this conflict because it could not understand Vietnamese problems in any context other than that of the Cold War.

In the preface to his book, Hunt describes how his early conceptions of Vietnam were shaped by reading such works as Lederer and Burdick's *The Ugly American*, Fall's *Street without Joy*, and Greene's *The Quiet American*. Spending two summers in the early 1960s in Saigon with his family, where his father was working with the U.S. military mission, served to reinforce this basic concept of Americans as innocent moral crusaders (to use Greene's perception) who operated outside of and in ignorance of the context of Vietnamese history and culture.

The author begins his book with a long look at the American approach to the Cold War. In the first chapter of the study, "The Cold War World of *The Ugly American*," he examines the United States' seeming indifference to the particular situation in Vietnam while focused on a more global question. That focus painted Ho Chi Minh with the brush of communism rather than patriotism and led initially to support of French colonialism in the area, then to the support of anticommunist leaders, an approach that drew the United States inexorably into the conflict. Here Hunt points a finger at the Eisenhower administration's paternalistic attitudes, which gave a " ... simple picture of Asians as either easily educable friends or implacable communist foes" (p. 17).

In the second chapter, Hunt examines Ho Chi Minh and the reasons for his popularity among the Vietnamese. Although not downplaying his communist background, Hunt makes the argument that Ho was something of a pragmatist who would use any means available to improve the lot of the Vietnamese. This form of nationalism was rejected by the Eisenhower administration, involved with sweeping abstractions which "... left nationalism starkly at odds with communism and could make no sense of politically engaged intellectuals as ready to rally against American as they had against French domination" (p. 41).

Hunt reserves some of his scorn for the enthusiastic but inexperienced members of the Kennedy administration who worked at making Vietnam an undeclared war as the United States became ever more involved in the 1960s. In a chapter titled "Learned Academics on the Potomac" he examines individuals such as Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, and John F. Kennedy himself in light of their continuing Cold War outlook and the problems of Southeast Asia inherited from the previous administration.

But the author's assignment of the ultimate responsibility for involving the United States militarily in Vietnam is evident in the title of this volume. In the next-to-last chapter in the book, with a pithy quote from Lyndon Johnson as a title–"That bitch of a war"–Hunt pushes the real responsibility for the war onto Johnson. Though the "learned academics" helped set the scenario for war, Johnson missed numerous opportunities to shunt it aside. Hunt suggests that Johnson imagined a moral landscape in Vietnam reminiscent of 1930s Europe while using inappropriate experiences from his years in Congress and the Texas Hill Country to devise methods for creating stability in Saigon. To quote from this chapter:

How distant Johnson's Vietnam was from the real thing and how close to his own American experience is evident in his constant injunction to his Vietnamese allies to act like proper leaders–by which he meant helping

constitutents, showering benefits on them, and getting out for some serious handshaking (p. 77).

The critical decisions in Vietnam were Johnson's. And most, according to Hunt, were wrong, often made in the face of conflicting advice from those around him, who were starting to see the errors of continuing the conflict. To be fair, the author notes that the war really was the product of a series of presidential decisions over several decades, " ... of which Johnson's [decisions] happened to be the last" (p. 107).

In the last chapter of the book, "How Heavy the Reckoning?", the author looks at the United States' extraction from the war and the ramifications of that conflict on the American psyche. Although the subtitle of the book would suggest that its coverage ends in 1968, Hunt takes the U.S. relationship with Vietnam up to the early 1990s, when President Clinton was working on rebuilding ties with that country, along the way looking at the continuing discord over the American involvement. He makes an interesting military analogy here when referring to the American experience in Vietnam, describing the difficult times of the war as "only a flesh wound" (p. 125), but slow to heal and leaving a scar.

Although there is little new or particularly sensational in Michael Hunt's slim volume, it is a well-written primer on how the United States became involved. Hunt's concerns about America's Cold War mentality come through often and in a rather heavy-handed manner from the subtitle of the book to the last chapter, but not in a way detrimental to the book as a whole. On balance, the book seems an even look at events and causality. For students, at whom this volume seems to be aimed, the usefulness is increased by a well-done bibliographic essay. This book can be recommended to anyone seeking a succinct analysis of how the United States was drawn into the Vietnam War.

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