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**Rhiannon Vickers.** "Harold Wilson, the British Labour Party, and the War in Vietnam". *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10.2 (Spring 2008): 41:70.

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Reviewed by **Matthew Jones**, University of Nottingham

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One of the perennial questions that hovers over discussions of British policy toward the Vietnam War is why, despite frequent requests from the Lyndon Johnson administration in Washington, the Labour government that assumed office in October 1964 refused to send combat troops to fight alongside the Americans, despite shared perceptions of the Communist threat to South East Asia as a whole. In this article, Rhiannon Vickers takes as her focus for approaching this issue, as well as the wider subject of Harold Wilson's overall policy toward the war, the opposition to the Vietnam War that emerged within the Labour Party as American military pressure against Hanoi intensified in early 1965 and U.S. forces began to be deployed in ever-greater numbers to the South. Despite the pressures of backbench opinion within the Parliamentary Labour Party and dissent from the party's left-wing grass roots supporters in the constituencies, many of whom came to see Vietnam as an imperialist war fought against a people struggling for national liberation, Wilson is portrayed as maintaining the special relationship with the United States through support for the fundamentals of American policy, while also successfully holding the party together, partly through the occasional conduct of high-profile peace initiatives.

Feeling with some reason that intra-Labour Party debates over Vietnam have been overlooked or neglected in the existing literature, Vickers uses the Party's archives in Manchester to very good effect to show the extent of discontent that was manifest at various levels. It is a little surprising that more references were not drawn from the Richard Crossman, Barbara Castle or Tony Benn diaries (particularly early on), in order to give a flavour of both the changing mood in Cabinet regarding Wilson's leadership and the way ministers were interpreting backbench opinion. On the wider party stage much unease was clearly apparent: the party conferences of 1966 and 1967 saw members voting

to reject the government's backing for the American war effort, the first time that a Labour government's policy had been repudiated in such a manner. Disillusionment with Labour's handling of Vietnam, Vickers also highlights, may have led to left-wing activists turning away from party alignment toward the single-issue pressure and protest group politics of the later 1960s and 1970s (61-2).

How far, then, should Labour Party opposition to the Vietnam War be used to explain the direction of policy, and what harm could internal party criticisms actually do to the government? On this latter point, and as Vickers herself mentions, Labour's wafer-thin majority up to the March 1966 election was a strong inhibitor on parliamentary dissent, as MPs had no desire to so weaken the government that a Tory revival might be triggered. Although she makes great play of the unfavourable resolutions passed by the party conferences, Vickers also accurately notes that they were not in practice considered binding on the government, and that Wilson was quite ready to ignore these expressions of revolt when it suited him (59-60). In making such qualifications, Vickers is obviously being scrupulously fair, but it must be said that in doing so also weakens the core of her basic position. Within the government itself, the vast majority of Labour ministers were committed to strong transatlantic relations, and though there were many reservations over the methods the Americans chose to employ in Vietnam, there was a basic belief that a Communist victory would be inimical for Western interests in South East Asia. At the same time, no ministers, Wilson included, had any wish to send British troops to Vietnam. What is extremely doubtful, however, was if aversion to a troop commitment was ever reducible to calculations of the political impact it would have had on the government, severe as this would certainly have been if such an improbable decision had ever been taken.

At one point in her article, having listed the various tokenistic ways that Britain supported the American war effort in Vietnam (such as police training and the supply of certain munitions), Vickers contends that, 'These actions indicate that Wilson's refusal to commit British troops to the war resulted mainly from his practical concern about the strong opposition he would confront within his party' (49). As offered here, this just does not work as a line of convincing explanation, and is actually contradicted by some of the evidence and interpretation offered elsewhere in the article, where many other factors are seen as operating on ministers when it came to the level of involvement that could be countenanced in Vietnam. These included the draining commitment of British forces to the *konfrontasi* (confrontation) between Malaysia and Indonesia (mentioned on 47, but then passed over), the overriding need to cut overseas defence spending that was recognised as soon as Labour came to power (for example at the Chequers meetings of November 1964 written about with such great cogency by Saki Dockrill), and the simple fact that official British analysis of the prospects in Vietnam was almost uniformly bleak. As Vickers acknowledges, no-one in the Foreign Office advocated the despatch of British troops (51), even though its officials were perpetually attuned to the requirements of Anglo-American relations, and from the summer of 1964 onwards the U.K. intelligence

community was beginning to compile very pessimistic evaluations of the chances of American success against the growing Communist insurgency.

An argument dependent on domestic political imperatives tends to ignore the central problem for British foreign and defence policy in South East Asia at this time, which no government of whatever political complexion could have avoided: the Indonesian campaign of *konfrontasi* which threatened to subvert and break-up the British-created Malaysian federation. At its height there were 80,000 British service personnel, 200 aircraft, and eighty Royal Navy vessels committed to this low intensity conflict, where British interests and prestige were genuinely at stake (unlike in Vietnam). Labour was every bit as committed to the preservation of Malaysia as the Conservatives, and determined to oppose Indonesian plans. Indeed, it was Labour ministers who took several of the most crucial decisions on the military aspects of *konfrontasi*, such as allowing British forces to penetrate across the border of Indonesian Kalimantan up to a depth of 10,000 yards to disrupt raiding camps, and to reinforce quite substantially the forces deployed to Borneo in response to Indonesia's own build-up (reaching a peak strength in January 1965 of 20,000 troops, just before U.S. combat forces were to arrive in South Vietnam). Any British government's policy toward the Vietnam War has to be seen in the context of what was occurring over Malaysia, from 1963 when the federation was formed in the teeth of Indonesian opposition, until August 1966, when *konfrontasi* finally came to an end through the Bangkok Agreement. *Konfrontasi* was a frustrating and debilitating struggle because Indonesia was in a position to control the pressure and level of the fighting, the British having no desire for all-out war. The commitment to Malaysia also made it impossible to plan for any major reductions in British forces in South East Asia and heightened the pressures on an already stretched defence budget.

Moreover, there had also been a number of very important understandings reached between London and Washington during 1964 – established by Sir Alec Douglas-Home on his first meetings with Johnson as Prime Minister in February - over the connections between Vietnam and the Indonesia-Malaysia conflict. The Americans were ready to accept Britain's contention that it was making a valuable contribution to the stability of South East Asia by opposing the regional ambitions of President Sukarno, who was increasingly reliant on the domestic political backing of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Britain, by the same token, affirmed its support for the efforts of the United States in South Vietnam, though it was understood that with the demands of *konfrontasi*, there was no question that combat troops could be despatched. Indeed, such was American aversion to Sukarno by this stage, they were prepared to let the British know that if *konfrontasi* developed into full-scale war, the United States would give their ally all the assistance they could. It was this *quid pro quo* that Wilson reaffirmed when he visited Washington in December 1964, and which informed Anglo-American relations in South East Asia until the summer of 1965. At this point the landscape of *konfrontasi* was radically altered by Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia, and the later suppression of the PKI by the Indonesian Army, a development which marked the eclipse of Sukarno's hold over Indonesian policy. These powerful elements in the external environment, combined

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with the government's overriding need to bring about economies in defence spending (brought home once again when the results of the 1966 defence review were viewed as inadequate), always made it highly unlikely that British troops would be sent to fight in Vietnam, however permissive the domestic political context.

In a much stronger aspect of her argument, Vickers sees Wilson's peace initiatives between 1965 and 1967 as driven by the need to assuage his party critics over the Vietnam war, as well as by his proclivity to adopt the role of 'statesman' on the international stage (69). Though performing a useful function in party management terms, she is also surely correct to conclude that the chances of Wilson's diplomacy producing any kind of negotiated settlement (or even a negotiation between the major combatants for that matter) were virtually nil given the attitudes on display in both Washington and Hanoi. Indeed, by this time, Britain's role and voice in policy deliberations within U.S. administrations was receding as it began the process of withdrawal from East of Suez. Finishing with a well-balanced and considered assessment of Wilson's performance over Vietnam, Vickers maintains he showed 'political acumen and diplomatic skill' in manoeuvring between preserving close transatlantic ties and reassuring his party base that Britain would stay out of active involvement and work for peace as one of the co-chairs of the Geneva Conference (70).

Despite the weaknesses of its earlier claims, the article suggests the significant scope for comparative work on backbench and wider party opinion and influence over Labour's foreign policy during this period of British decline. Vietnam was not the only, or necessarily the most important foreign policy issue that excited wider party concerns over the period. The government's response to Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in November 1965 engendered deep and sustained controversy as sanctions proved ineffective, and carried the potential to cause quite genuine damage to the government (underlined, for example, by the charge of appeasement, most notably following Wilson's abortive and misguided talks with Ian Smith on HMS *Tiger* in December 1966). Another subject of contention was arms sales to South Africa, where Wilson demonstrated adroit manipulation of the issue, and of backbench opinion, to undermine the position of his critics in a manner that contributed to George Brown's resignation as Foreign Secretary in March 1968. That said, however, understanding of the domestic political context must also be placed alongside a thorough appreciation of the external determinants and conditions within which policy has to be formulated: for an article dealing with British foreign policy there is not much material here drawn from the The National Archives at Kew, beyond a few PREM 13 references, when Foreign Office and Cabinet Office files (in the latter case, for example, the records of the Overseas Policy and Defence Committee) would have allowed for a far fuller picture to have been accommodated of why and how Wilson managed to steer Britain clear of being drawn into 'LBJ's War'.

--Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

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Professor **Matthew Jones** is a member of the School of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Britain, the United States, and the Mediterranean War, 1942-44* (Macmillan, 1996), and *Conflict and Confrontation in South East Asia, 1961-1965: Britain, the United States, Indonesia and the Creation of Malaysia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), and has published articles in many journals, including *International History Review*, *Diplomatic History*, and *English Historical Review*. He is currently completing a book for Cambridge University Press with the title *America, Asia, and the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Race, and the Containment of China, 1945-1965*.