

**James W. Morley, Masashi Nishihara, eds..** *Vietnam Joins the World*. Armonk, N.Y. and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997. xv + 244 pp. \$61.95 (cloth) \$23.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56324-974-7.

**Frank E. Vandiver.** *Shadows of Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson's Wars*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997. xv + 396 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-89096-747-8.



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The Vietnam War continues to loom large in the psyche of the American people and historians of American foreign relations. Although President Bill Clinton restored diplomatic relations with Hanoi in August 1995, the transition has not been without its difficulties. Not only must the long-standing enmity between the two countries be overcome, but Vietnam's evolution from international pariah to an active member of the world community remains a work-in-progress. By the same token, historians continue to grapple with the meaning of the war, its legacy, and questions of responsibility for the Second Indochina War. One needs only observe the great interest in the on-going release of President Lyndon B. Johnson's telephone conversation transcripts to realize that

Vietnam still fascinates and troubles many in the United States. The two books under consideration address these questions and seek to shed light on the past and future of America's relationship with Vietnam.

In the Introduction to *Shadows of Vietnam*, Frank E. Vandiver asks, "Why another book on Lyndon Johnson and his wars?" True, the literature on the war is enormous and expanding, due in no small part to the continual (albeit seemingly glacial) declassification of documents on the conflict. Yet serious historical scholarship on the war remains in the early stages as historians begin to examine the key years of the conflict using archival materials. Indeed, many of the recent works on the war have tended to be focused on a

specific event or period rather than looking at the entirety of the Vietnam experience.[1] To his credit, Mr. Vandiver has attempted to write an overall account of Lyndon Johnson's direction of U.S. policy in Vietnam during his tenure in office—a daunting task given the almost overwhelming abundance of sources available. Is such a study needed? Mr. Vandiver's answer is yes, and he is absolutely correct. As for his approach, the author explains that he is "trying to present Johnson's own perspective on Vietnam decisions and realities" in the hope that this "empathy...can lead to an understanding of pressures and motives" which confronted Lyndon Johnson (p. xi). Given the on-going revelations occurring in the literature, the defensiveness he displays in his Introduction is not justified.

Then again, defensiveness is warranted given the kind of book Mr. Vandiver has written. *Shadows of Vietnam* is little more than a rehearsal of familiar events. This is perhaps a result of the sources on which the book is based. Mr. Vandiver relies heavily on interviews, memoirs and secondary literature to tell his story; very little of the voluminous wealth of archival material on the war is cited. This in itself is not problematic. Not everyone dealing with Johnson and the Vietnam War can be expected to spend months digging through the files at the Johnson Library in Austin. Yet Mr. Vandiver fails to critically assess the first-person accounts upon which he depends for much of his evidentiary base for the narrative, accepting at face value the self-serving comments of advisers such as, for example, Clark Clifford (pp. 117, 319). The book does contain a fascinating section on Captain James Floyd Ray based on his heretofore unexamined letters to his wife. A career soldier with an brilliant resume both academically and militarily, the story of Ray's efforts in South Vietnam is both inspiring and tragic (pp. 179-186). Beyond this, however, the book rarely delves into the source material beyond a superficial use of information.

*Shadows of Vietnam* presents the conventional story of the escalation of the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam and the relationship of the conflict to Johnson's dreams of creating the Great Society, both at home and abroad. At the beginning of the book, the reader can be forgiven for feeling some sympathy for Johnson. He inherited the Vietnam problem from John F. Kennedy and the situation was clearly in disarray following the dual assassinations of Kennedy and South Vietnamese premier Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. In addition, the president's own clear preference for his domestic agenda made him an unlikely wartime leader. Yet as the book moves through Johnson's presidency, Mr. Vandiver glosses over Johnson's dissembling, manipulation, and deception as he and his advisers sought to keep the war out of the public consciousness for as long as possible. This lack of candor was most obvious during 1964 as Johnson sought to sweep Vietnam under the rug as he focused on the task of winning the White House, and through the massive escalation of 1965-1967 which was undertaken without public debate.

In focusing a great deal of attention on the events in January and February 1965, Mr. Vandiver correctly emphasizes the most important period in the entire American involvement in Vietnam. His portrayal of Johnson during this period is of a careful and cautious leader who worried constantly at each step of escalation. Johnson emerges as a decision-maker who listened to all points of view prior to making a decision, including the contrary opinions of George Ball. Mr. Vandiver maintains that Johnson "accepted the best of no acceptable options" when he initiated ROLLING THUNDER and committed U.S. combat troops to Vietnam. But is this actually true? During the first year of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson had two obvious opportunities to disengage the United States from Vietnam without facing the torrent of negative domestic opinion he feared. The first occurred immediately after Kennedy's assassination; Johnson could have used public

sympathy to end the American commitment. The second came in the wake of his landslide victory over Barry Goldwater in the 1964 election. With the resounding mandate and four years until having to face the electorate again, LBJ could have announced that the United States had completed its mission in South Vietnam and brought the advisers home. Furthermore, even in February 1965, Johnson could have called for a public debate on Vietnam which would have at least resulted in an extra-administration opinion on the matter. Instead, the only discussions took place within the administration where dissenting opinions were limited to Ball and, briefly, Clark Clifford. Throughout the book, Johnson is portrayed as seeking divergent opinions and weighing pieces of information against the big picture (pp. 12-13, 258, 270). Yet even Mr. Vandiver recognizes that when LBJ made "the significant move of approving combat missions--and thus changed the whole face of the war," the president failed to tell the public what he had done and thus established the foundation for the "credibility gap" which would haunt him in 1967-68 (p. 100).

Although the United States continued to escalate the war for the next two years and eventually committed over 540,000 troops to the defense of South Vietnam, the forces of anti-communism made no progress against the North Vietnamese and their NLF/Viet Cong counterparts. This lack of success should not have surprised anyone in the administration. As early as May 1965, outgoing CIA Director John McCone admitted that defeating Ho Chi Minh's forces would be unlikely at best (p. 116). Indeed, a multitude of opinions suggested that a quick victory would be virtually impossible and the United States would have to stay the course for anywhere from two to ten years in order to have a chance of winning. As the administration sank deeper into the quagmire, public opposition to the war increased almost exponentially and included such former LBJ allies as J. William Fulbright and Mike Mansfield--both of whom had dissented in private as early as 1963.

Yet Johnson remained steadfast in his commitment to Saigon until 1968. Mr. Vandiver points to the Tet Offensive of 1968 as the critical moment for LBJ. He suggests that more than any other military crisis of the war, Tet damaged Johnson psychologically, although his portrait of the president in the first three months of 1968 is more positive than most other scholars (pp. 285, 288-89).

At times, Mr. Vandiver makes perceptive analytical points which, if pursued, would strengthen the book. For example, in assessing the discrepancy between Johnson's successful conclusion of the Dominican Republic crisis in 1965 and the failure of his Vietnam policies, Mr. Vandiver suggests that Johnson's effectiveness was largely "because the Dominican crisis came on his watch, all of its drama played out before him, and its problems were essentially political. He had his hands firmly on the power tokens, knew how to use them, and was able to work without fear of nuclear holocaust. He dealt with the Dominican crisis as he wanted to deal with Vietnam--but there he controlled fewer of the players on a stage that brinked the third world war (p. 83)." The author also recognizes astutely the role played by the personal credibility of American policy-makers, particularly McNamara, in the decisions made during this period (p. 140). While American prestige and credibility have often been cited as reasons for escalating and prolonging the war by both the participants and later by scholars, the personal reputations of Johnson, McNamara, and others in the administration deserves increased emphasis.[2] Yet these moments of insight are few and far-between and are hidden within a morass of gushing, novelistic prose, breathless exclamatory sentences, and distracting one-sentence paragraphs. The author also makes statements that are left hanging, leaving the reader to wonder what happened. These stylistic flaws hinder the reader's attempts to follow the narrative.[3]

The author also suffers from "Johnson myopia;" that is, by looking at most of the events

through Johnson's perspective, he omits outside perspectives that would complement the Johnson-centric view Mr. Vandiver has used to tell the story. As a result, Johnson is presented as a larger-than-life figure, a "flawed giant" of a man with great energy, enormous ambition for his country and himself, and a determination to extend the benefits of the Great Society to the world. The paranoid, obsessive, closed-off Johnson seen by some scholars disappears in these pages (p. 276). This approach to the book reflects a larger partiality in these pages. The author's prejudices are apparent throughout the narrative. With the exception of Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, who emerges as the only villain in the book, Johnson and his civilian policy-makers and political advisers are treated sympathetically. McNamara comes across as a brilliant but inconsistent adviser who manipulates Johnson, the Joint Chiefs (who, according to Mr. Vandiver, also share in the blame for the course of the war), and other administration officials in order to further his own agenda—even to the point of deliberately misleading the president. Yet even McNamara is ultimately acquitted, being described as "[a] true casualty of the Vietnam War ... warped into a torn and riddled soul as his plans, numbers, hopes, and promises unraveled (p. 263)." Indeed, despite his claims to the contrary, Mr. Vandiver often crosses the imaginary biographer's line from empathy to apology, putting an overwhelmingly positive spin on the events of 1963-1968. Johnson can be absolved from his mishandling of the war in Vietnam, according to the author, because of his need to secure the objectives of the Great Society. In addition, the antiwar movement is given short shrift in the book and is clearly viewed with distaste by Mr. Vandiver (pp. 190-192), who does not employ some of the best known literature on the antiwar protesters. [4] Further, the media receives its share of the blame from the author for Johnson's problems in Vietnam. The media's reaction to the Battle of Ap Bac and the Tet Offensive, *New York Times* reporter Harrison Salisbury's series on the

effects of bombing on North Vietnam in 1967, and Walter Cronkite's searing comments about the course of the war are all used by Mr. Vandiver to portray the media as inhibiting Johnson's ability to govern by creating higher stakes for LBJ in his handling of the war and undermining the national consensus (pp. 68, 225, 285, 287-88).

Mr. Vandiver concludes that Johnson "had taken on JFK's battles and fought them doggedly, he had an American vision that achieved things for blacks and the poor and downtrodden beyond any president's boast. Yet he realized that whatever he wanted would be blurred by Vietnam prejudices, because Vietnam shrouded him like Lady Bird's black cloud ... He wanted something he could not guarantee—he wanted well of history." Johnson, the author concludes, was the personification of America: "Big, powerful, full of hope for the future, and determined to protect democracy ... a colossus without conscience, and yet one that somehow touched the hope of millions in the world (p. 339)." Rather than being blamed for Vietnam, Johnson is excused for perpetuating the longest conflict in American history. Indeed, although it is true that labeling Vietnam as "Lyndon Johnson's War" is not wholly accurate,[5] Mr. Vandiver would have his readers believe that LBJ was the valiant champion whose good intentions to assist a troubled country in Southeast Asia concurrent to creating the Great Society at home was thwarted by events and circumstances outside of his prodigious control. This apologetic argument does not hold up to the weight of historical evidence.

In the final analysis, Mr. Vandiver has written a detailed but ultimately disappointing narrative account of Lyndon Johnson's involvement in Vietnam. Readers who want to get the basic story of the evolution of the U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia and the information and recommendations Johnson considered as he made critical decisions will find it here. Scholars seeking more than a sympathetic retelling of events will come away

frustrated with the book's lack of objectivity and critical scrutiny.

Where Mr. Vandiver addresses the past, James W. Morley and Masashi Nishihara look at the present and a future in which *Vietnam Joins the World*. Based on a project on the former Indochina states inaugurated in 1990 by American and Japanese scholars, this compilation of essays examines Vietnam's efforts to reintegrate itself into the international community and economy. The essays are the product of a multi year research program which included visits to Cambodia, Laos, China, and Vietnam to interview officials and private citizens, gather materials, and form firsthand impressions. The editors argue that given the fragile situation in Cambodia and the changes currently underway in Vietnam, it is "particularly urgent at this time ... that the American and Japanese people know more about Vietnam (p. viii)." These concerns are well justified. Although a voluminous literature exists on the Vietnam War, precious little has been written on Vietnam after the Second Indochina War. In addition, Vietnam's status as an international outcast has left it closed to scrutiny for much of the past three decades. With the increase in trade, cultural exchanges, and the resumption of diplomatic relations, understanding Vietnam has become an increasingly significant issue. This volume is an important contribution to our understanding of how the war experience affected Vietnam in the long term and where its future development might lead.

A brief overview by the editors examines Vietnam's decision to rejoin the world. These efforts began in December 1986 after the Sixth National Party Congress at which the decision for fundamental renovation--*doi moi*--was made. With the selection of new leadership in the wake of the death of Le Duan, who had been general secretary for the previous twenty-six years, Vietnam began to concentrate on economic growth through a move away from centralization and

state ownership (although not totally) toward a "supplementary economy of private enterprise, free markets, and global engagement" requiring ideological flexibility. This would necessitate a heavy infusion of capital, technology, and managerial skills from abroad. Accordingly, in May 1988 the party announced the adoption of a foreign policy less tied to the Soviet bloc. It rejuvenated its efforts to persuade the United States to normalize relations and Japan to resume economic assistance. Further, Hanoi also began a campaign to feel out its neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (p. 5).

The authors believe that the same kind of Vietnam is in the interest of both Japan and the United States--one that is market-oriented, democratically inclined, and militarily secure. To bring this about, they contend, the two powers should open their markets to facilitate trade, support full Vietnamese engagement in ASEAN and other regional economic structures, urge Hanoi to reduce its armed forces, make their own values clear, launch vigorous programs of cultural exchange, and encouraging the development of active programs in Vietnam by nongovernmental organizations (pp.10-11).

The contributors then consider the changes which are being wrought by the leadership in Vietnam. The essays are broken down into three sections: reform at home, which discusses politics, economics, social change, and Vietnam's strategic predicament; the opening of Vietnam to the world, focusing specifically on Hanoi's relationship with China, Cambodia, and ASEAN; and the American and Japanese responses to Vietnam's new policies. The most interesting of these essays is by Frederick Z. Brown, who discusses the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations in historical terms and posits where the newly-established relationship might lead (pp. 200-24). The concluding chapter details the recommendations of the contributors and editors for the United States and

Japan to engage the new player in the Asia-Pacific equation.

The picture of Vietnam that emerges from this book is of a country moving forward from a war-torn, impoverished isolation to a future filled with hope. Contrasted with the "Asian tigers"--South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong--Vietnam remains a developing nation. Yet given the explosion of investment by international corporations and the potential of Vietnam as a market, the future appears to be very bright indeed. Yet the authors are realistic enough to recognize potential obstacles to Vietnam's continued progress and admit that it is "not beyond the realm of possibility that Vietnam may fail in its present efforts, that 'old thinking' will regain its power." This would be "an unmitigated disaster" for the Vietnamese people, a lost opportunity for the United States and Japan, and could ultimately pose security problems of "unforeseeable proportions (p. 227)." While recognizing differences in policy toward Vietnam (pp. 230-31), the authors conclude with seven recommendations for both governments that they believe will help to promote the continuation of Vietnam's transformation (pp. 231-33).

This is a fascinating and informative look at Vietnam. The editors and essayists have spent a great deal of time and effort in studying the situation in Vietnam and this book gives a penetrating look at conditions today and the promise (and portents) for the future. Although intended as a policy prescription for United States and Japan, anyone interested in understanding Vietnam would be well-advised to read this volume.

Notes:

[1]. See for example Edwin E. Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

[2]. The argument that personal credibility was a vital consideration for Johnson and his advisers is made persuasively in Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and Es-*

*calation of War in Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming, spring 1999.

[3]. The most obvious examples of this are found in Mr. Vandiver's descriptions of the key players in the story in Chapter Three (p. 38-56); see also pp. 226, 246.

[4]. Two of the best known works on the anti-war movement are Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1990; and Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

[5]. Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam*. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton and Co., 1989. With all due respect to Berman's thesis, Lyndon Johnson should not bear the brunt of responsibility for Vietnam alone. In addition to those in his administration who advocated escalating the war, Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy raised the stakes for America in Southeast Asia and hawkish members of both parties at home (John Stennis, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford to name but three) pressed the administration to do more to ensure the survival of the multiple Saigon regimes.

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