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Toward a Political History of the Vietnam War

Robert Mann's *A Grand Delusion* is one of several recent, timely works that have revisited the decisions that brought America into the Vietnam War. Unlike Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War* and David Kaiser's *American Tragedy,* however, Mann's book identifies policymaking patterns (and underlying "delusions") over the course of the whole period from 1945 to 1975. Neither an academic historian nor a career student of the Vietnam War, Mann is an experienced Senate staffer whose previous work confirms a talent for biographical narrative and lucid explanations of legislative maneuverings.\[1\] In *A Grand Delusion,* Mann undertakes "a political history of the Vietnam War" that "places the roles of leading members of Congress in their proper perspective" (p. 4).

Notwithstanding its size and ambition, Mann's book has elicited less commentary than other recent works on Vietnam, perhaps because it has been perceived as popular narrative history.\[2\] Its fixed focus on American policymakers, which flies in the face of growing interest in international history and other innovative approaches, may reinforce this perception. Despite Mann's disinclination to address a scholarly audience directly, however, his study does contribute to the ongoing debate over Lyndon Johnson's crucial choices in 1964 and 1965. At the same time, the limitations of Mann's work raise issues about the study of Congress's role in American political and diplomatic history.

Mann sets up his story with three introductory sections. First, he elaborates the theme of "delusion." American policymakers embraced the myth that the war was against international Communism rather than nationalist resistance to colonialism, and also "wrongly assumed that the war was primarily a military, not a political struggle" (p. 3). Gripped by these delusions, successive presidents misled Congress and the public about their intentions. Then, Mann shifts to the Senate floor on February 17, 1965, when the young, ambitious and relatively pragmatic liberal Senator Frank Church spoke against the escalating U.S. military effort in Vietnam, offering a critique of global mil-
itary interventionism that sought to distinguish prudent restraint from isolationism.

In his last piece of stage-setting, Mann describes the political demise of Truman's presidency after 1949. "The fall of China was a call to arms for conservative Republicans" (p. 27), creating ripple effects including McCarthy's insinuating attacks, Truman's politically forced intervention in Korea, and Democratic losses in the 1950 elections. The situation worsened for Truman in 1951, and in the next year's campaign Republicans finessed their own foreign-policy differences by invoking the administration's well-known failures. In Mann's rendering, the events of the period amount to a nightmare scenario for future presidents. "Truman and Acheson were almost crucified for their misfortune in Asia" (p. 49). At the same time, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon were all "watching and learning" (p. 49).

Mann's extended preliminaries display his three main concerns. He returns later to the Senate doves, but concentrates from the beginning on the intertwining themes of deluded anticomunist fixations and domestic political imperatives. He also seeks to incorporate Congress into the story of Indochina policy under Truman and Eisenhower, citing occasional legislative actions and the statements of interested members, such as Kennedy and Mike Mansfield. Despite Mann's storytelling gifts, his narrative covers familiar ground somewhat reductively, where U.S. policymakers continue to act on the same delusions and fears.

While his account generally follows William Conrad Gibbons's comprehensive treatment of legislative and executive policymaking, Mann also mines Foreign Relations of the United States volumes, the Congressional Record, and various other sources. But his engagement with relevant scholarship is uneven. He draws upon studies that relate well to his themes, such as Joseph G. Morgan's recent work on the American Friends of Vietnam and the "free Vietnam" myth promoted by Ngo Dinh Diem's American following. But his grasp of other arguments seems shaky, as when he mentions U.S. policymakers' linkage of Indochina to the needs of Japan's postwar economy. He describes Vietnam as a perceived source of raw materials, but not as a market for Japanese exports, as John Foster Dulles intended. The early part of his account lags well behind recent scholarship, such as Mark Philip Bradley's examination of the influence of American racist, colonialist stereotypes, or Mark Atwood Lawrence's portrayal of the role of transatlantic-coalition-building policy advocates in securing American support for the French war effort.[3]

As the crisis in Vietnam deepened, Congress became more engaged. Mann views Congress in terms of individuals—such as Mansfield, Church, J. William Fulbright, and George McGovern—rather than group dynamics or institutional forces. Using interviews and archival sources, Mann offers acute, generally persuasive renderings of his lead characters, with special emphasis on Mansfield's evolving personal views. He devotes a chapter to Mansfield's December 1962 Vietnam trip and subsequent "bombshell" report to Kennedy (which questioned the importance of U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia).

Unfortunately, Kennedy's policies "would never be as daring and unconventional as his aides and admirers would later contend" (p. 227). Both JFK and LBJ, in Mann's view, were swayed by the same combination of delusion and political expediency as their predecessors. Kennedy "distinguished himself by an eagerness to find innovative ways of implementing America's existing policy" (p. 227), while remaining fearful of the political consequences of losing South Vietnam to communism. Lyndon Johnson manifested the same tendencies. Early in 1964, with Nixon and Barry Goldwater in campaign mode, Johnson's "political antennae had detected the first soundings of a new 'Who-lost-China' debate involving Vietnam"
Johnson feared being pulled into a larger war, but, as he told Senator Richard Russell, "the fear the other way is more" (p. 336).

Political fears remained crucial, Mann argues, through the 1964 election and afterwards. Johnson's pre-election strategy, "splitting the war down the middle" between escalation and withdrawal, bought time until November (p. 336). The Tonkin Gulf episode allowed LBJ to obtain an explicit grant of authority and, at the same time, to turn the tables on Goldwater. After reelection, he began facing his deferred choices, but still concealed his deliberations and sought to manage the politics of the issue. Unlike Logevall and Kaiser, Mann does not perceive Johnson's 1965 decisions to send U.S. forces as essentially predetermined by plans he approved in December 1964. But, like Logevall, he does emphasize Johnson's intense efforts to manufacture congressional support for his own closely held decisions as well as his dismissiveness toward independently conceived outside views.

Especially with the Senate debate on the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Mann's coverage shifts toward his congressional protagonists. Each of them understood, or soon came to understand, the delusions underlying America's policies in Vietnam. Yet each also failed, for one reason or another, to stand in Lyndon Johnson's way. Part of this is because Johnson misled them for so long, encouraging them to see him as they wished—as a liberal sympathizer open to possibilities for serious negotiations. But each senator was ultimately responsible for failing to use his own opportunities to counteract the administration's course.

As he recounts the development of the Senate opposition in 1965 and afterwards, Mann conveys his own frustrations with his protagonists' various failings. Mansfield avoided being cut out of contact with the president, but surrendered his potential role as an opposition leader. McGovern passed up his one true opportunity to build an antievolution majorities by not running for president in

1968, before the Democratic nomination became "devalued currency." Fulbright ultimately made good use of his position of power, launching his committee hearings and exposing deceptions by the administration. But even he, in Mann's view, was hindered by a lack of talent and inclination for coalition-building. (Mann cites Randall Woods's biography of Fulbright, but never addresses the author's point which credits Fulbright with using his own basic conservatism to win over fellow southerners.)

While protest and public discontent forced Johnson out of office, the Senate doves still failed to win control over the legislative process. With Nixon's ascendancy, Mann's coverage of presidential policymaking recedes further, and the controlling decisions on the war become essentially a backdrop for the doves' ongoing struggles. Mann contributes little to the growing literature on Nixon's policymaking as president. He repeats H. R. Haldeman's quote about Nixon's "madman theory," and associates Nixon with the same old anti-communist delusions, but he also attributes Nixon's support for South Vietnam to a "slavishly loyal" attachment to Nguyen Van Thieu based on the events of October-November 1968.

In following the "vanquished antiwar amendments" which, by the end of 1971, "littered the Senate's political landscape," Mann finally approaches the Senate doves as a group (p. 690). Collectively they lacked cohesion and effectiveness for three reasons: no leaders stepped forward (since Mansfield and Fulbright would not, or could not); most of them as individuals were "lone wolves", inclined to resist coercive leadership; and, beyond objecting to the war, they shared few opinions in common and could not agree on a single plan. Both Fulbright and McGovern, in Mann's view, further compromised their usefulness by expressing views which went well beyond what a majority of senators (or, in McGovern's case, voters) would ever endorse. Mann notes Henry Kissinger's observation, by 1972, that Congress
would inevitably cut off war funds, but he never credits the doves with forcing the pace of Nixon's belated troop withdrawals. The doves' one achievement, together with John Stennis and other southern conservatives, was the War Powers Act (which still could not pass the House of Representatives before 1973).

Mann's book is both less and more than a "political history of the war," given its selective focus and questionable arguments. The "delusion" thesis is most frustrating because it reproduces so completely the arguments and assumptions of the antiwar critics themselves; judging from Mann's work, there would be nothing new to say about "Asian nationalism," or anticommunist fixations, that was not already said at the time. The parsing of Church's Senate speech at the beginning seems to point toward a reconsideration of the doves' views which Mann ultimately never undertakes.

But some of Mann's insights go well beyond the idea of "delusion." Perhaps the best example involves his emphasis on perceived political imperatives. Here Mann offers a counterpoint to Logevall's argument about Lyndon Johnson's freedom of action, although he never explicitly addresses this argument. Logevall shows that during the period in early 1965, before U.S. troops were sent in large numbers, neither public opinion nor congressional sentiment strongly favored further intervention in Vietnam. "The pressure for escalation was minimal," and right-wing hawks spoke for a small segment.[4] Influential figures (including Russell, Mansfield, Fulbright, and others) hoped for a settlement that would extricate the United States, but, in Mann's view, LBJ always saw himself as "boxed in" politically. "More than anything," he asserts, "Johnson was profoundly influenced by the vivid memories of the political upheaval of the early 1950s, which told him never to yield an inch of Asian soil to the communists" (p. 458).

Logevall's argument assumes that because the political environment can be retrospectively re-constructed in a particular way, Johnson should have understood it in the same fashion and grasped the feasibility of his options. But insofar as he was informed by the "who-lost-China" experience (as persuasively reconstructed by Mann), Johnson would surely have expected sentiments to shift once adverse events—or events which could have been portrayed adversely and blamed on him—actually started happening. Did Americans express strong support for intervention in China prior to the Nationalist collapse? Presumably not, but this did not help Truman later on.

Mann's evaluation of the Senate doves raises one more aspect of the situation which Johnson seems to have appreciated. Johnson's career, and especially his Senate leadership, had been spent gauging the shape and limits of possible actions, based on his reading of personalities—their stature, their abilities, how they could be handled. Stature (or lack thereof) and ideological orientation often went together, at least for Senate liberals. For senators who were doves and liberals, the weaknesses which Mann identifies—disunity, "lone wolf" tendencies, lack of pragmatism—were qualities which LBJ himself recognized from years of experience. These senators, to use Johnson's own terms, were mostly "minnows," not "whales" (like Russell, or Everett Dirksen). If Johnson had chosen differently on Vietnam, exposing himself to assault by Republican leaders and hard-line anticommunists, would the minnows have been a solid base of support? Would they have been any more cohesive, or more effectively led, than they were during their many years of opposition to the war?

Mansfield and Fulbright were not minnows, but their disabilities as antiwar leaders raise the same question about their presumable effectiveness as defenders of disengagement. Would their individual statements or their group leadership have prevented a "who-lost-China" reprise? Johnson presumably judged that he could more reliably count on manipulating them into acquies-
ence while taking the course they opposed. Logevall deals with the doves by assigning them their share of blame for not speaking out, but this confirms Johnson's insight. LBJ made his choices regarding Vietnam, in part, based on his understanding of how others would act. The point is not that he chose correctly but, as Mann helps to illustrate, that more can be said for his grasp of political constraints and opportunities than others have allowed.

Mann also deserves appreciation for offering such a thorough yet accessible study of his Senate protagonists. As several leading scholars have observed lately, too few historians have taken up the challenge of examining Congress and its operations.[5] As congressional history, however, Mann's book has fundamental drawbacks. Since he approaches only selected individuals as objects of close analysis, his conclusion about Senate doves—that their failures to change Vietnam policy resulted from their failings as individuals—appears to follow from his own choices regarding method and scope. A more rigorous explanation of Congress's role in the Vietnam War would re-examine hawks, and ask why they succeeded legislatively for as long as they did, not just why the doves failed. Also, it would develop an argument that goes beyond the character of individual legislators. As Julian E. Zelizer has observed, too much of what has been written on Congress has been "insular." To explain convincingly events which occurred outside—or even inside—of Congress, "congressional historians will have to examine how the institution's development related to external forces" in society and culture.[6] Other recent works have effectively related individual congressional leaders to a broader context.[7] But in covering the whole span of America's descent into Vietnam, Mann has pointed toward the array of research opportunities that beckon.

Notes


[7]. Examples include Randall Bennett Woods, Fulbright: A Biography (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Zelizer, Taxing America: Wilbur D. Mills, Congress, and the State, 1945-1975 (Cambridge University Press, 1998), which relates Mills and his committee to the broader "policy community" that shaped taxes and Social Security; and Byron C. Hulsey, Everett Dirksen and His Presidents: How a Senate Giant Shaped American Politics (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), which shows Dirksen's contribution to a "suprapartisan" policymaking environment.
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