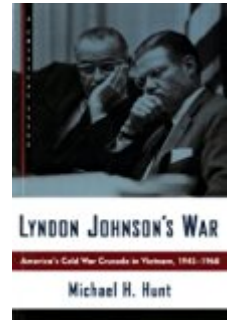


Michael H. Hunt. *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. ix + 146 pp. \$11.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8090-1604-4.



Reviewed by T. Christopher Jespersen

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For years teachers at all levels have relied on George Herring's *America's Longest War* when faced with the decision as to what to have students read about the American involvement in Vietnam. Then came Marilyn Young's *The Vietnam Wars*. Robert Schulzinger is completing his study, but all of these are larger works with a broader focus. Michael Hunt's submission is a modest and tightly focused effort that provides teachers from Advanced Placement courses in American history to general surveys of U.S. history at the college level with an excellent option for covering the American involvement in Vietnam. His book is readable, informative, concise (128 pages of text), and engaging. It also contains a short list of recommended readings, endnotes, and a map.

The real strength of this work, and what sets it apart from the Herring and Young volumes, is the blending of diplomatic and cultural histories and the careful selection of examples to highlight points, all of which allows Hunt to establish his theme early and return to it often without appearing repetitious. In short, America's willful igno-

rance, hubris, and cultural chauvinism created a mindset that precluded policymakers from learning about Vietnam before making one fateful decision after another.

Hunt opens with a discussion of *The Ugly American* by William Lederer and Eugene Burdick, ties it to Graham Greene's novel, *The Quiet American*, and sets the tone for the rest of his study by weaving together traditional diplomatic concerns with a review of examples from popular culture and how they reflected American attitudes. His discussion draws from Jonathan Hellman's excellent book on the Kennedy administration.

For students unfamiliar with the war generally and the Vietnamese side in particular, the chapter on Ho Chi Minh is essential. Hunt identifies "three brocade bags" Ho carried with him throughout his effort to establish his nation's independence. The first, and most important, bag contained Ho's nationalist credentials and his enduring patriotism. The second was the understanding of Leninism and international communism he adapted to suit the circumstances of Viet-

nam. The final bag accommodated the populist programs that allowed Ho and the Viet Minh to broaden their appeal and forge the mass support necessary to combat first the French and later the Americans.

In his chapter on Lyndon Johnson, Hunt fully develops the paternalistic framework he sees as guiding American policy toward Ho and Vietnam. His discussion of Johnson's upbringing draws from the lengthier investigations by Doris Kearns, Paul Conkin, and Robert Caro. And as Lloyd Gardner has recently argued in *Pay Any Price*, Johnson took to imagining how the New Deal of his youth and the Great Society he sought to create as an adult could be extended to the frontiers of Asia. Hunt concurs and does a fine job of analyzing the words Johnson used to express his aspirations. Of course the president was not alone in either his hopes for Vietnam or in his arrogance toward the Vietnamese, both Northern and Southern. As Hunt indicates on the issue of American officials' attempts to get the South Vietnamese leaders to reform their government throughout the 1960s, the discussions held by the two sides "sounded more than ever like the exchanges between impatient parents and irresponsible, unruly children" (p. 80).

On the relationship between Kennedy, Johnson, and their advisers, Hunt sounds the argument first articulated by David Halberstam twenty-five years ago and assiduously researched and argued by George McT. Kahin more recently: namely, that the advisers—from McGeorge Bundy, to Walt Rostow, to Dean Rusk, and Robert McNamara—bear a substantial share of the burden for the involvement in Vietnam. Johnson's "stance was in part shaped by Kennedy's advisers, men whom the president quickly decided to retain in his service and who had themselves begun the process of Americanizing the conflict" (p. 78). Having established the role played by the president's advisers, Hunt parts company with Kahin and lays the blame squarely on Johnson. "Lyndon

Johnson must bear primary responsibility for the Vietnam War. He advanced toward his July 1965 decision confident in his Cold War faith, his nationalist ideals, and his code of manliness" (p. 106). And yet, in remaining true to his assertion about the cultural arrogance of the American national involvement, Hunt adds, "But Lyndon Johnson's war was also America's war, a national crusade whose sources transcend one man." Finally, with respect to the American war effort, Hunt concludes, "Perhaps above all, it emerged out of an American culture which claimed to speak and act for other peoples without knowing their history, language, and aspirations" (p. 107).

In assessing Johnson, Hunt addresses what he calls "the most searching and widely accepted indictments lodged" against the Texan, and in the process, tackles, directly and indirectly, some of the common misconceptions about the war that have developed since 1975. First, Hunt observes that Johnson was not completely candid with the American people about his decisions relating to Vietnam, but that the president's lack of candor arose out of his fear of whipping up another Red Scare. Second, Hunt establishes that Johnson was adequately informed about the potential dangers arising out of a military escalation. In addition to in-house dove George Ball, Senators Mike Mansfield, George McGovern, and Wayne Morse complained publicly about the administration's approach and warned about the dangers that lay ahead.

That the Cold War cast a shadow over the way in which policymakers viewed events in Vietnam is without question true. Perhaps even more dangerously, however, the nation's effort "emerged out of an American culture which claimed to speak and act for other peoples without having their history, language, and aspirations" (p. 107). Michael Hunt has provided another valuable tool for teachers of recent American history; it is one that students will find engaging, compelling, and challenging.

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