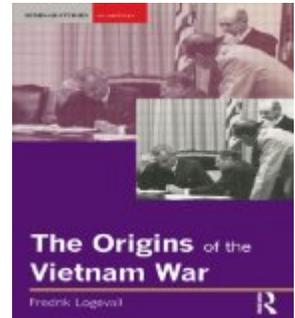


**Fredrik Logevall.** *The Origins of the Vietnam War*. Harlow: Longman, 2001. vi + 156 pp. \$16.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-31918-9.



**Reviewed by** Brian Clancy

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## Moths to a Flame

While brevity is the essence of wit, brevity was the last thing this reviewer expected from the burgeoning Vietnam literature. Yet here it is. The editors of the Seminar Series in History asked Fredrik Logevall to produce an introductory book that clarified the origins of the Vietnam War without falling prey to over-simplification. The author, an authority in the field, was up to the challenge. In *The Origins of the Vietnam War*, Logevall examines the roots of the conflict from the French colonial experience to President Lyndon Johnson's decision to escalate the war in 1965. If you are looking for a concise book on this topic, Logevall's latest offering deserves serious consideration.

The research is drawn largely from Logevall's award-winning book *Choosing War*. In that work, he placed American decision-making in an international context by exploring how important foreign capitals viewed the developments in Vietnam. He drew upon archival material from Canada, Britain, France, Russia, Japan, China, and Vietnam. Moreover, lamenting the American-centered nature of the Vietnam historiography, Logevall

spiced the well-used American government sources with documents that reflected the mood in Congress, the media, and public opinion. But his latest book offers more. Indeed, *The Origins of the Vietnam War* reflects Logevall's continued growth. Readers familiar with his first work will note the additional research on the French colonial experience. The book also reflects the influence of other recent leading works in the field, notably Mark Bradley's *Imagining Vietnam and America*, Robert Brigham's *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, and William Duiker's *Ho Chi Minh*.

Tracking down the origins of the Vietnam War is a messy business on the best of days. The search for blame and lessons continue to produce a shower of debris and it will be some time before the dust settles. Indeed, interested readers should sample H-Diplo's February 2000 roundtable on Logevall's *Choosing War* for examples of this healthy debate. In the historiography, criticism has been heaped upon just about every participant or organization involved with the decision to escalate the war in 1965. Government officials, journalists, and historians alike have stabbed

through the fog of war with their pens, blaming capitalism, bureaucratic inertia, pressure from the right, bumbling on the left, and that perennial favorite, Lyndon Johnson. Logevall found all of these American-centered explanations wanting. So he set out to place American decision-making in its wider international context to better understand why diplomacy failed to stop major war in Vietnam. Wider context is often used to divest a decision of its contingency, but Logevall does not use it to spread the blame or provide vast impersonal forces to exempt Johnson from responsibility. Instead, the author uses it to prove that traditional contextual arguments--about the legacy of containment or the pressure of credibility on the United States--were not valid. In the end, he found that Johnson ignored domestic and international support for a negotiated settlement and instead chose war to preserve American credibility on several levels, not the least of which was his own.

Logevall divides the war's origins into four parts. He begins by leading readers through the French colonial experience and the factors that led to their defeat in 1954. The French were attracted to Indochina by the mutually reinforcing aims of empire and financial gain. French colonial rule proved harsh and when Vietnamese efforts to secure political reforms failed, nationalist parties and small groups of rebels staged an unsuccessful uprising. The emergence of Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930 proved particularly problematic for the French. Logevall characterizes Ho as possibly the most misunderstood historical figure of the twentieth century. Joining a recent historical debate, Logevall argues that Ho was more of a nationalist than a Communist, offering a document outlining the foundation of the Vietminh as evidence (pp. 13). To counter the Vietminh, the French created a puppet regime, portraying the war as one between free Vietnamese and Communists. This was exactly how the Truman administration saw the struggle. Ignoring no fewer than eight requests for assistance from the Vietminh, Truman instead

stepped up military aid to the French. In time, the Vietminh found military support from the Soviets and the Chinese, defeating the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. Despite Congressional reluctance to assist the French any further, President Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles saw Vietnam as a vital regional domino and chose to set the stage for American involvement in the wake of the French surrender.

With the French experience established, Logevall turns to the Geneva Agreement and its failure to bring peace to the region. Despite international wishes for a neutralist or Titoist government in Vietnam, Eisenhower and Dulles subverted the 1954 Geneva accords and set the stage for a Cold War showdown. Fearing American intervention, Ho settled for a partitioned country and an election slated for July 1956. The election, of course, never materialized. As Logevall notes, the Americans knew a loser when they saw one and their man Diem was particularly skilled at alienating those he led. Turmoil quickly set in across the south as Diem alienated non-Catholics and balked at land reforms. By 1960, the northern Communists had created the National Liberation Front to back disaffected southerners. In northern eyes, Vietnam was one country and Diem's refusal to hold the 1956 elections led Ho to seek reunification by other means.

By the time John Kennedy received his first presidential briefings on Vietnam, a major insurgency was underway. Yet opportunities for a negotiated settlement remained. As Logevall argues, the North Vietnamese remained interested in a negotiated settlement during this period, noting that one of their core aims was the avoidance of a direct military conflict with the Americans. The tragedy here was that peace advocates, whether in Washington, Hanoi, or other major capitals, proved unwilling to press for a resolution (pp. 51). For his part, Kennedy was determined to defend South Vietnam, choosing a middle path between

negotiations and escalation. Central to understanding Kennedy, Logevall argues, was his determination to preserve American credibility in the wake of the Bay of Pigs, Vienna, and the Berlin Crisis. Logevall argues that the question in Kennedy's inner circle was not whether, but rather how, to commit American resources to the region (pp. 45). Kennedy chose to follow Eisenhower's lead, remaining opposed to diplomacy until terms could be dictated to Hanoi. Despite the intrigue over what Kennedy might have done had Oswald missed, Logevall finds little evidence to suggest that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam (pp. 56).

On that infamous November day in 1963, the burden of Vietnam was delivered to Johnson on an assassin's bullet. And what a burden it would become. Logevall argues that Johnson found little support for war outside his cabinet room doors. Democratic Party leaders, the media, and much of the world community failed to see any Western security interests at stake in the jungles of Vietnam. But LBJ saw the situation differently; all options on his desk presupposed the need to stand firm. In his mind, the Great Society was tied to a hard-line anti-communist policy and he was determined to preserve an independent South Vietnam. Accordingly, he ignored any advice that involved a negotiated settlement. Logevall argues that, despite having a viable option to wash his hands of Vietnam in 1964, Johnson instead quietly approved a two-phased escalation plan designed to bring Hanoi to its knees. Johnson, Logevall contends, knew that the basing of American fighter-bombers on South Vietnamese soil would lead to the introduction of combat forces to protect the airfields. The communist attack on Pleiku in February 1965 raised the stakes. Logevall suggests that this attack need not have been a major turning point, that decisions made could have been undone (pp. 76). But instead, Johnson sent his jets north, hardening Hanoi's resolve. This was just as well, for while the North Vietnamese may have been open to negotiations, Logevall argues that

the Johnson Administration never truly was. Johnson was committed to a military solution, and in the end got his ground war in Asia and with it all the ingredients of a Shakespearian tragedy. By the summer of 1965, the fissures that would shatter Lyndon Johnson's presidency in 1968 were readily apparent: the sickly South Vietnamese ally, the international clamor for a negotiated settlement, and a growing number of American elite sick of the whole thing.

In his concluding chapter, Logevall wades into the historical debate over inevitability. Was the Vietnam War a necessary war as some argue, or was it altogether avoidable? Logevall continues to make a case for human agency in the decision-making process and remains a leading proponent for seeing the war as an avoidable tragedy. Here he hands out his verdicts. He finds fault with meek peace advocates, and Hanoi for playing good diplomatic cards poorly, but reserves his harshest criticism for Johnson's leadership. LBJ's 1964 landslide election victory, Logevall argues, would have protected him from political attacks while he sought a negotiated settlement. Indeed, Vice President Hubert Humphrey considered this opportunity. "Nineteen-sixty-five," he wrote, "is the year of minimum political risk for the Johnson administration" (pp. 90; see also the full document reprinted on pp. 124-28). Similarly, Clark Clifford, a senior statesman in the Democratic Party, counseled Johnson to moderate the nation's position and find a negotiated settlement; otherwise, he too could see nothing but catastrophe ahead (doc. 22, pp. 132). But with Saigon on political life-support, the president was in no mood to bargain with Ho. Instead, Logevall argues, Johnson, with the blessings of his inner circle, chose war "out of fear of embarrassment--to the United States and the Democratic Party and, above all, to themselves personally" (pp. 92).

As the old adage goes, good things come in small packages, and for this book, the adage holds true. Among its strengths the book boasts fine

writing, superb research, and a thought-provoking argument that will fuel class discussions. Useful added features support the narrative, including a chronology of events, a cast of characters, and twenty-two primary documents. Moreover, the bibliography is an excellent gateway for further study. As with all enjoyable short books, however, readers are often left wanting more. In this case, detailed character sketches of the principle players would have served the argument well. Indeed, if agency is as important as Logevall argues, then it seems reasonable to expect some background on Johnson's inner circle. In this account, Johnson, McNamara, and Rusk seem two-dimensional, perhaps leaving novices to wonder why LBJ took such silly advice while ignoring a chorus of voices who seemingly knew better. But alas the editors proved miserly with their page length and perhaps they can be forgiven seeing as brevity is the essence of all good short histories. Readers wishing for more details about key participants should consult *Choosing War* or David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*. All things considered, Fredrik Logevall achieves his objective, providing us with a useful book on the origins of the Vietnam War that will undoubtedly find its way onto undergraduate and graduate reading lists alike.

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