Scholarship on presidential decisionmaking in the era of the Vietnam Wars conveys a somber message. Unable to conceive of an independent Vietnam, Roosevelt endorsed the return of French colonialism. Beginning in 1946, the Truman administration covertly armed France against the Viet Minh, then expanded and went public with its assistance in 1950. Eisenhower subverted the Geneva Accords and conjured up South Vietnam. Kennedy dispatched helicopter crews and Green Berets and rained down Agent Orange on the Vietnamese. Johnson sent troops and planes in 1965 and to the end of his administration sought military victory. Demonstrating a similar obduracy, Nixon turned up the firepower all over Indochina. Every US president plunged in deeper when he could have pulled back, and the result was thirty years of war in Vietnam.

Presidential initiatives again and again steered the country in the same direction with an inevitability that commands our attention and eludes our understanding. Perhaps ideological factors explain why historians only occasionally evoke the economic, the imperial, character of US foreign policy. But an impression persists that, at least in its early manifestation, “revisionism” fell short of explaining events in Vietnam. The specter of international communism has aged even less gracefully and, indeed, is largely absent from the literature. A variant, that a Cold War mentality, however inadequate as a guide to Soviet or Chinese behavior, influenced policymakers, can be affirmed with confidence. But references to “anticommunist paranoia” in the White House (Olson and Roberts, 1996, p. 25) do no more than open the inquiry.

In this essay, I dwell on works that lead toward new or significant revision of old interpretations. Recent publications demonstrate how race and gender constructions promoted intervention. They explore policymaking dynamics that impeded strategic thinking and blocked out dissenting views. The underscore the limits of US power and the stubbornness of chief executives who refused to admit defeat. They raise hopes that higher levels of understanding of the Vietnam War are within our grasp.

The Prism of Racialized Hierarchies

estimates that US leaders welcomed the French return to Indochina in the spring of 1945 and were quick to support France’s campaign against the Viet Minh.

The Cold War did not prompt these moves. In 1945, the Americans were worried about the Red Army presence in Eastern Europe, but they did not feel a similar concern over Soviet intrusion in Southeast Asia, and with good reason. No scholarly treatment suggests that the USSR was meddling in or even paying attention to Vietnam in the last days of World War II. “The Soviet Union took virtually no interest in the Viet Minh’s problems,” Gary Hess declares. “It did not extend diplomatic recognition to the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] and continued to regard France as the legitimate ruler of Indochina” (Hess, 1990, p. 37).

Great power rivalries loomed larger in 1950, when Harry Truman publicly embraced the anti-Viet Minh cause. Some argue that this escalation was a response to Soviet success in exploding an atomic device, the victory of communism in China, and the North Korean invasion of South Korea. But American policymakers were not simply reacting to threats from the enemy camp. Because their bipolar construction of the world was not wholeheartedly embraced by US allies, they felt all the more compelled, in the words of Lloyd Gardner, to insist on “Cold War unities” (Gardner, 1988, p. 90). Even the French seemed less committed than the Americans to achieving victory in Indochina, a curiosity noted, but not explored, in a number of accounts. Washington’s fear of international communism is itself a phenomenon, requiring explanation.

In pursuing the analysis, some scholars have stressed economic considerations. Yet in that respect as well, a 1945 starting point is awkward. Michael Schaller (1982) and Andrew Rotter (1987) analyze US efforts to safeguard Japanese interests in Southeast Asia, but only in the 1947–50 period, after the United States decided to rebuild Japan. The case for economic motives at an earlier date remains to be established.

Some treatments suggest that the Americans were obliged to follow their allies in Paris. “Not wanting to raise French ire over Indochina, Truman acquiesced” (Olson and Roberts, 1996, p. 25); US leaders were “fearful of antagonizing France” (Herring, 1994, p. 13); they showed themselves anxious to “placate” the French (Moss, 1998, p. 29). Yet no one seriously argues that De Gaulle was strong enough to dictate to the United States.

Perhaps at a later date Washington adopted a conciliatory approach in hopes of securing French backing for German integration into the European defense system. But such considerations hardly applied in 1945, when the United States and the USSR were still fighting against Nazi Germany. In the following years, if “Europe” explains US policy in Asia, then one would expect the White House to have discouraged a war that “retarded France’s economic recovery” (Herring, 1996, p. 15). It makes more sense to assume that the United States had its own reasons for blocking Vietnamese independence and that the French role in Indochina was desired by the Americans.

The Vietnam/Korea parallel clarifies the US agenda. In both countries at the end of World War II, an “August Revolution” brought leftist regimes to power. In Vietnam, the Americans lined up with French colonialism; in Korea, they counted on Koreans who had collaborated with the Japanese and on Japanese instruments of control, most notably the National Police. The US occupation force in Korea declared
war on the indigenous left, while the State Department trailed behind this anticipation of the Cold War. By contrast, Americans stationed in Vietnam looked askance at the returning French and remained open to dialogue with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) after pro-French Foreign Service officers had abandoned the “trusteeship” option in Washington. But within weeks, disjunctures between the home front and its agents in the field disappeared, and the entire US team opted for counterrevolution in both Korea and Vietnam (on Korea, see Cumings, 1989).

Franklin Roosevelt’s role in these developments remains in dispute. Stein Tonnesson argues that Roosevelt wanted an end to French Indochina and hoped that trusteeship would succor Vietnamese people newly liberated from colonialism (see the review of the literature in Tonnesson, 1991, pp. 13–19). But, in Approaching Vietnam (1988), Lloyd Gardner maintains that the president envisioned “a liberal empire” in Asia. Intended to obstruct both French colonialism and Vietnamese independence, trusteeship, with a Guomindang-governed China joining the United States in providing oversight, was a chimera. Not surprisingly, “in a sudden gust at Roosevelt’s death, the pieces all flew apart.” There is a link, Gardner adds, in a blunt passage, between FDR’s “dream” and John Foster Dulles’s plan for a strong US presence in postcolonial Vietnam (Gardner, 1988, pp. 52–3).

Elaborating on the imperial theme, Mark Bradley dwells on longstanding anti-Asian biases that influenced Roosevelt and other policymakers. For them, the Vietnamese were a weak, unintelligent, deceitful people. Some State Department personnel supported and some opposed trusteeship, but all saw Vietnam through the same “prism of racialized hierarchies” (Bradley, 2000, p. 77). When Roosevelt expressed hope that American tutelage would allow Vietnam to achieve self-government, he was anticipating that independence would be granted twenty, thirty, or even fifty years after the end of World War II. While criticizing French colonialism, US leaders scorned the Vietnamese people.

Bradley does not spare Archimedes Patti, who later claimed to have perceived the mettle of the Viet Minh, but whose cables at the time took no distance from racial stereotypes. Patti and other OSS personnel were well disposed toward Ho Chi Minh because he seemed an anomaly, an intelligent and honest native who would serve “as a vehicle to transfer American values and aims onto the Vietnamese movement for independence” (Bradley, 2000, p. 139). In light of this paternalism, one might doubt that there was a lost opportunity for rapprochement between an independent Vietnam and the United States.

Bradley suggests that Orientalism rather than anti-communism shaped Washington choices. In the last days of World War II, the Americans were more worried that Chiang Kai-shek might try to extend Chinese influence into Indochina than about Soviet imperialism. The communist threat did not enter into their deliberations until September 1946, and then only after prompting from the French, who knew what chord to strike in order to mobilize American support for their cause. US leaders bought into this conception not because of anything Moscow was thought to be doing, but based on a longstanding assumption that the Vietnamese were incapable of self-government. If France and the United States were pushed out of the country, they reasoned, Vietnam would gravitate by default into the Soviet orbit.

Mounting Cold War tensions in 1949–50 do not make American choices easier to understand. At that time, US anxiety about communism was not felt elsewhere
with the same urgency, not even by the most vulnerable “dominos.” Save for Thailand, the governments of South and Southeast Asia declined to recognize the State of Vietnam, set up by the French in 1949, and several maintained communications with the DRV, in spite of the US insistence that Hanoi was an outpost of the Kremlin and Communist China.

Scholars have labored to make sense of the 1945–6 period. But progress was made when George Kahin demonstrated that Roosevelt belongs in the story and Lloyd Gardner proposed a way of interpreting FDR’s approach. Amplifying on these overtures, Mark Bradley’s meditation on trusteeship establishes that “the prism of racialized hierarchies” ranks among causes of the Vietnam Wars.

**Limits of Eisenhower Revisionism**

Unimpressed by “Eisenhower revisionism,” Vietnam War historians do not see Dwight Eisenhower as a statesman who exercised power in a restrained, responsible fashion (see references and development of the argument in Anderson, 1991). They indicate that the president wanted Paris to concede Vietnamese independence, follow Washington directives, and allow US advisers a free hand within the Saigon government. When the French refused these terms, Eisenhower decided against a rescue operation at Dien Bien Phu, while looking for other ways to thwart the Viet Minh. The result was perhaps the most drastic escalation in the 1945–75 period, involving sabotage of the Geneva Accords and consolidation of a separate state below the 17th parallel.

The motives for these commitments remain unclear. Some historians mention Eisenhower’s April 1954 “tin and tungsten” press conference, in which he dwelt on strategic raw materials in Southeast Asia, but without developing the point into a larger interpretation of American policy. Standing on their own, references to international communism also fail to resolve the problem, given that Washington’s fear of Soviet and Chinese expansion was not shared by US allies, including Winston Churchill, who made explicit his rejection of the domino theory. At the Geneva Conference, the USSR placed a priority on détente with the United States, and Chou En-lai worked with the French and the British and tacitly with the Americans to dash Viet Minh hopes for a united, independent Vietnam. In short, Eisenhower and Dulles adopted an adversarial posture toward Vietnamese communism, not in response to an objective necessity, but because of the peculiar construction they placed on the Cold War.

“McCarthyism” helped to produce this outcome, but not in the way one might expect. In his biography of Tom Dooley (1997), James Fisher argues that elements within the CIA and European-born social democrats such as Joseph Buttinger encouraged the administration to create South Vietnam. Edward Lansdale and others aimed to keep the Vietnamese in the Free World while also foiling McCarthy and his allies and carving out more political space for liberal anti-communism. In a titanic miscalculation, they saw Ngo Dinh Diem as a “democratic socialist,” a progressive ally who would bolster the US position in Asia and provide an alternative to dictators sponsored by reactionary forces in the United States.

The youthful, vaguely countercultural Tom Dooley, with his breezy Catholicism, was an effective front man for the CIA. His *Deliver Us From Evil* (1956), an account
of Vietnamese Catholics fleeing from a satanic communism, is a Cold War classic. At the same time, he was able to charm newspaper people and the public in a way that the dour McCarthy and his ilk were not. But then, in an astonishing turn, the gay, sexually active Dooley was driven out of the military by homophobic security agents. Friends in the intelligence community helped him land on his feet as a “jungle doctor” and CIA asset in Laos. While Lansdale pulled the strings and the United States intruded into Laotian affairs, Dooley’s celebrity grew in ways that carried beyond the Cold War script.

Fisher’s biography of Dooley is among the first works on the Vietnam War to comment simultaneously on policymaking and on American society. There were links between decisions at the top and social trends, he argues. Vietnam choices in the era of Eisenhower and Dulles constituted a moment in the history of liberalism, Catholicism, and gay subcultures in the United States.

Similarly interested in the interplay between politics and sexuality in the McCarthy era, Robert Dean (2001) argues that anti-communist purges were reinforced by a ferocious patrolling of gender boundaries. Showing that government employees were cashiered for sexual as well as for political offenses, Dean argues that “perverts” were even more persecuted than “reds.” As domestic spying overran private life and character assassination came to dominate political quarrels, the struggle for control over sexual secrets ran parallel to and merged with the struggle for control over US foreign policy.

Taking for granted its access to high office and drawing inspiration from the likes of Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Stimson, patrician elements within the foreign policy establishment were caught in a web of surveillance and repression. Whereas earlier accounts linked partisan quarrels to class and regional hatreds, Dean goes further to demonstrate how culturally based definitions of manhood also came into play. Forming an “imperial brotherhood,” the patricians were imbued with a masculinity inculcated in the prep schools and Ivy League universities they had attended and reinforced by service in war and the national security state. McCarthyite allegations that they were incompetent and effete challenged their public careers and their male identities.

Political figures who lived through McCarthyism responded by placing an even greater emphasis on “toughness” in public life. The result was a loss of analytic flexibility, a hardening of imperial arrogance, a tendency toward symbolic as opposed to substantive deployments of power. “Credibility” was not just an ideological quirk. For elite survivors of the sexual inquisition, it became an obsession.

Our understanding of Vietnam decisionmaking in the McCarthy period has been changed by recent scholarship. Of course the presidents and their advisers paid attention to the Soviet threat and to “tin and tungsten.” But at a moment when political discourse was manifestly overdetermined, it makes sense, indeed it seems imperative, to explore the social and cultural forces that energized and limited their actions. Disputed and reconfigured gender identities added impetus to US intervention in Vietnam.

**Experiment in Counterinsurgency**

Kennedy nostalgia still glimmers around the edges of recent scholarship. Passing over “flexible response” and counterinsurgency, not to speak of John Kennedy’s
in infatuation with the Green Berets, David Kaiser makes much of the president’s “personal grace,” which “enabled him to maintain his emotional equilibrium” and also “helped the vast majority of his fellow citizens to maintain theirs as well” (Kaiser, 1999, p. 266). Equally inattentive to what the administration was actually doing in Vietnam, A. J. Langguth (2000) asserts that, in the weeks before his death, JFK envisioned a fundamental change in US policy (for references to what might be called the “Oliver Stone” view of the assassinated president, see Buzzanco, 1996, p. 82).

Fredrik Logevall’s interpretation is more complicated, but he, too, regards Kennedy as a thoughtful leader who took his distance from Cold War orthodoxies. Responsibility for escalation, Logevall argues, rests on the shoulders of Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, and McGeorge Bundy. Or perhaps LBJ alone was to blame. If Kennedy had lived, his advisers might have been more inclined “to ask the really fundamental questions about the war,” to achieve a rapprochement with the USSR, and even to address the “difficult frictions between rich and poor nations” (Logevall, 1999, pp. 399, 412).

These wistful passages appear out of place in an otherwise rigorously argued text. Kennedy “would not have seen the war as a test of his manliness to the same degree as did Johnson,” asserts Logevall, “for though himself imbued with a good dose of machismo, he was less prone to extending it to the nation, to the complex world of foreign policy” (p. 399). But this nonanalytic formulation seems sentimental in light of Robert Dean’s work. As Dean (1998) shows, Kennedy’s class-based and historically determined conception of masculinity disposed him to personalize foreign policy issues and to see Cold War competition precisely as a test of manhood.

In any case, Logevall rejects the suggestion that Kennedy aimed to reduce the US commitment in Vietnam and dismisses his much-touted recall of 1,000 US personnel as a “token” gesture (Logevall, 1999, pp. 69–70). Other historians agree. “There is not a shred of evidence,” George Herring declares, that Kennedy planned to reverse course. Herring paints a portrait in vacillation, far different from the bold and decisive image of JFK cultivated by his admirers. The president refused “to face the hard questions” (Herring, 1996, pp. 104, 119). William Turley (“improvisational, incremental, tentative, and temporizing”) seconds the view that Kennedy lacked the imagination and courage to break from the Cold War (Turley, 1986, p. 41).

A number of texts highlight Kennedy’s sponsorship of counterinsurgency, including the use of defoliants. If the United States “could not locate the enemy because of the jungle, then eliminate the jungle,” write James Olson and Randy Roberts (1996, p. 110). Marilyn Young states that Kennedy wanted to turn Vietnam into a “laboratory for counterinsurgency techniques” and estimates that 100,000,000 pounds of herbicides were eventually dropped (Young, 1991, p. 82). Guenter Lewy cites polls taken in Vietnam indicating that “eighty-eight percent of the villagers interviewed blamed the US/GVN for the destruction of their crops and 74 percent expressed outright hatred” (Lewy, 1978, p. 260).

Many studies indicate that Kennedy insiders reacted to Cold War events, such as the “wars of national liberation” speech delivered by Nikita Khrushchev in January 1961, in an idiosyncratic fashion. The Soviet leader launched “a passionate appeal for peaceful co-existence,” affirms Young, with “generalized support for wars of national liberation in the colonial world” expressed only in passing. Kennedy seized on the aside because it better fit his preconceptions (Young, 1991, p. 76).
In the same spirit, Robert Buzzanco cites JFK’s “strident” anti-communism and agrees with the notion that he was “a consummate cold warrior.” When military leaders expressed doubts about Vietnam, the president brushed them aside. His “critical ruminations,” which Logevall takes as expression of Kennedy’s contemplative bent, were “little more than devil’s advocacy” (Buzzanco, 1996, pp. 81, 111). The argument is different, but the balance sheet is just as negative in H. R. McMaster’s book (1997), which portrays Kennedy and McNamara as dilettantes, unfit to lead the country into war.

The “Oliver Stone thesis” lingers in popular culture and along the margins of academic inquiry. But the scholarly view of JFK is less indulgent. Some portray him as reckless, others as temporizing, and a few insist that he was both. But there is a general consensus that Kennedy was a primary architect of the Vietnam debacle.

The Biggest Hawk of Them All

After his death, a certain sympathy made its way into accounts of Lyndon Johnson’s war policies. LBJ was seen as “a bound Prometheus” (Karnow, 1997, p. 574), a reformer who was frantic as Vietnam “strangled his beloved Great Society” (Moss, 1998, p. 159). Several studies affirm that he showed restraint in the face of enemy provocations until the National Liberation Front (NLF) attack on Pleiku in February 1965 forced his hand. Carrying the argument further, George Kahin (1986) states that the president resisted escalation and was induced to act only under pressure from truculent advisers.

In rebuttal, Fredrik Logevall declares that Johnson plotted for a wider war in 1964 and had committed himself to intervene by December of that year. Examining the domestic political situation and the mood in London, Paris, Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi, he suggests that, outside of the small circle of policymakers, no one wanted a confrontation in Vietnam. Even in the countries of Southeast Asia, where one might expect to find support for the American stand, there was “skepticism and fear” as the administration’s bellicose intent became apparent (Logevall, 1999, p. 181).

Historians may disagree in specifying the moment when the Johnson administration decided to escalate. But, Logevall avers, since peaceful alternatives were never explored or even considered, it was inevitable from as early as March 1964. “The biggest hawk of them all” (p. 335), LBJ was responsible for this outcome. Logevall’s demonstration that Johnson, and Kennedy, too, “chose war” sets a standard that future scholars will have to take into account.

Equally telling is the author’s portrait of politicians who privately opposed war, but publicly rallied to Johnson’s defense. The administration’s 1965 “White Paper” labored to prove that the Vietnam crisis was caused by external aggression. But Senator Mike Mansfield, an off-the-record critic of the president’s rationale for action, went out of his way to state that the document indicated “why this nation has been compelled to take the steps it has in recent weeks.” European allies of the United States, and especially the British, who kept their reservations about the American course to themselves, were also culpable in fashioning a “permissive context” for US intervention (pp. 358–9, 400–4).

At a deeper level, Logevall asks readers to think in a different way about the policymaking process. What looks like give-and-take among leaders earnestly seeking
answers is better understood as self-serving manipulation of the transcript. The counterfeit character of this posturing is nowhere more apparent than in the “devil’s advocacy” of George Ball, whose arguments nobody listened to and whose memos were never read, as Ball himself well understood. Logevall thinks that he “hoped one day to be Johnson’s secretary of state” and was not prepared to go beyond discreet criticisms of Johnson’s approach (p. 249).

This line of thought is elaborated in McMaster’s riveting work. Vietnam decisionmaking was a charade, he argues, where recommendations were drawn up before officials were dispatched on fact-finding trips to determine what to do and where decisions were made in advance of the meetings convened to discuss them. The real quagmire was in Washington, a place where everyone lied to everyone else, where choices taken by the commander in chief were based on domestic political considerations, and where military men who knew that US strategy would not work were bought off with increased budget outlays for the services they represented. McMaster comes close to saying that US leaders did not care about or even pay much attention to what was happening in Vietnam. He agrees with Logevall that before the 1964 presidential election, LBJ put campaign needs first. But whereas Logevall argues that policymakers were awaiting the moment, styled “D day” (Logevall, 1999, p. 194), when they would be free to escalate, McMaster insists that Johnson remained preoccupied by home front politics after November 1964. “Blinded by his desire to pass the Great Society legislative program, the president had found Vietnam a nuisance that he hoped would go away” (McMaster, 1997, p. 298).

Turning logic upside-down, LBJ and his cohorts convinced themselves that a bloody stalemate was preferable to a timely, if embarrassing, retreat. Robert McNamara thought “that a loss at the current [January 1965] level of commitment would be worse than failure after the commitment of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, airmen, and Marines.” Anticipating the consequences of escalation, McGeorge Bundy “admitted that ‘U.S. casualties would be higher – and more visible to American feelings,’ but dismissed that expense as ‘cheap’ relative to the costs of withdrawal” (pp. 207, 219). Through a magical alchemy, futile killing would make its perpetrators appear more “credible.”

Although Dereliction of Duty never spells out what a winning strategy might have looked like, some passages hint that a plan for victory could have been implemented if generals and politicians had been interested in formulating one. But the author makes clear, and Buzzanco agrees, that internecine rivalries within the Pentagon got in the way of strategic thinking. When he thought the honor of the Air Force had been slighted, Curtis LeMay challenged Army Chief of Staff Harold Johnson to an aerial duel (“I’ll shoot you down and scatter your peashooter all over the goddam ground”). Wallace Greene tried to promote realistic discussion, but was then diverted by promises that the Marines would be allowed to send more troops to Vietnam and even by planning sessions to improve “press coverage of Marine Corps actions” (pp. 114, 317, 304).

Logevall and McMaster reject older explanations for US intervention. They do not believe that the socialist bloc played a significant role in Vietnam, or even that such considerations weighed heavily in the minds of policymakers. “The Vietnam War was not forced on the United States by a tidal wave of Cold War ideology,”
McMaster asserts (1997, p. 323), and the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are only bit players in the narrative he constructs. Logevall states that the Americans “do not appear to have worried much about increased Soviet penetration” in the third world. As for the Chinese, “it is startling how seldom analyses of China’s posture and aims appear” in government documents. Also discounted are economic factors. McMaster shows no interest in the topic, and Logevall states that, “In the high-level policy deliberations of 1964–1965 concerns for the fate of world capitalism appear to have been entirely absent, while the main worry about the American economy was that it would be harmed by a large war” (Logevall, 1999, pp. 382, 291, 386 [author’s emphasis]).

This approach comes at a cost insofar as it leaves readers without an explanation for the president’s actions. Having ruled out “deep structural forces,” a perplexed Logevall notes that “the Americanization of the war becomes difficult to understand.” By default, he blames “Johnson’s profound personal insecurity and his egomania” (pp. xxi, 298). McMaster’s disdain is even more bitingly expressed, but he, too, does not say why a pack of impostors happened to be in power when the country plunged into war. The two books do not find the origins of the fiasco they so tellingly chronicle.

After being denounced by the anti-war movement, Lyndon Johnson gained a brief reprieve in the 1980s, when historians appeared willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. But recent works condemn LBJ’s conduct and policies. Talking peace while plotting war, he corrupted the 1964 election (with less success, he was to try the same tactic in 1968). Buzzanco, Logevall, and McMaster read him in different ways, but all agree on his deviousness and irresponsibility and all fix him with a major share of the blame for the catastrophe that followed on escalation.

**Refusal of a Decent Interval**

President Johnson’s speech of March 31, 1968, in which he announced a partial bombing halt and a willingness to negotiate with the North Vietnamese, as well as his decision not to seek reelection, opened the most surreal phase in the Vietnam War. “Peace” replaced “victory” in presidential discourse, and US troops started to come home. But blood continued to flow in Indochina.

George Herring offers the most emphatic reading of Johnson’s last months in office. According to Herring, the March 31 speech “did not represent a change of policy, but a shift of tactics to salvage a policy that had come under bitter attack.” Indeed, key elements of Nixon’s strategy originated under Johnson. In the fall of 1967, “Vietnamization” before the letter was broached, and the president launched a political offensive on behalf of “peace with honor,” aimed at “the silent center” (compare to Nixon’s “silent majority”). Meanwhile, extralegal attacks on enemies, including the CIA’s “Operation CHAOS” (a program for domestic surveillance), anticipated Nixon’s deployment of the “plumbers” (Herring, 1996, pp. 227, 198–201; for more, see Herring’s detailed treatment in *LBJ and Vietnam*, 1994).

The uncertainty surrounding Johnson’s last days in office carries over into discussions of the Nixon administration. Stanley Karnow asserts that Nixon “ruled out victory” but “refused to contemplate defeat,” while Kissinger hoped for an agreement giving “the Saigon government a ‘reasonable’ chance to survive – a ‘decent
interval,’ as he later said privately” (Karnow, 1997, p. 604). Gary Hess thinks the president was determined to “end the war” and also that he was “no more prepared than his predecessors to accept defeat” (Hess, 1990, p. 115). George Moss’s assessment is similarly puzzling. Nixon “did not delay ending the war,” he affirms, “because he was trying to win it, as some radical and liberal antiwar critics have charged.” A page later, he adds, “although Nixon never tried to win the war, he fought ferociously for years not to lose it, or at least to appear not to lose it” (Moss, 1998, pp. 337–8).

Jeffrey Kimball’s ambitious study tries to dispel the confusion. Within days after being sworn in, Nixon and Kissinger began the secret bombing of Cambodia. Confident that they could out-negotiate and outgun the enemy, the two men opened secret diplomatic channels to the USSR and the DRV and put forward Vietnamization as an antidote to the withdrawal of US combat forces. In July 1969, the administration warned Hanoi that measures “of great consequence and force” would ensue if concessions at the bargaining table were not forthcoming and contemplated various escalations (Operation “Duck Hook”), including the use of “a nuclear device” (Kimball, 1998, pp. 153, 163). In February 1970, “protective reaction strikes” began against North Vietnam, and B-52s hammered the Plain of Jars in Laos. In April, US and ARVN troops invaded Cambodia, and in February 1971 the Saigon army crossed into Laos with US air support. The following year brought intensified assaults on the North, culminating in the Christmas Bombing.

Nixon’s tactics were unlikely to succeed. The DRV would not be bluff ed by Vietnamization or by the administration’s feints at the bargaining table. Nor were Hanoi leaders going to yield to “Duck Hook” or other threats. To compound the problem, the president knew that “it would be very hard to hold the country together while pursuing a military solution” (cited in Kimball, 1998, p. 172), an insight whose prescience was confirmed in the wake of the Cambodia invasion.

Trying to seize the initiative, Nixon and Kissinger broke new ground with their overture to the People’s Republic of China. But, like earlier great-power maneuvers, this gambit betrayed an unwillingness to credit Vietnamese desires and capabilities and therefore could not transform the balance of forces. Still more original was the “madman theory,” the notion that the president’s reputation for instability, backed by spasms of violence, would unnerve the enemy. The “theory” was itself a symptom of folly.

These moves testify to the self-delusion of their authors. Nixon, who compared himself favorably to Lincoln, Churchill, and De Gaulle, and the equally vainglorious Kissinger persuaded themselves that they could surmount obstacles that had defeated their predecessors. They were not alone. In the spring of 1968, when President Johnson sent Averill Harriman to the Paris peace talks, Harriman still “wanted to believe that somehow a negotiated settlement could produce a viable, independent South Vietnam” (Isaacson and Thomas, 1986, p. 712). The prototypical “dove,” Harriman was at that moment trying to persuade other leaders that Vietnam had been a mistake and that the United States should find a way out of the war. Yet even he could not bring himself to envision an outcome short of victory.

There was no “decent interval” policy. At times, high-level officials seemed to be saying that the United States should withdraw and leave the GVN to its fate, even if that course eventuated in a communist victory. But no president was ever willing
to implement such a strategy. In an intriguing passage, Kimball affirms that by the end of 1970 Nixon and Kissinger began to envision a face-saving retreat. But the author is quick to add, “they had not, however, abandoned the hope that Thieu could survive into the indefinite future.” A year later, Nixon is portrayed as “eager to withdraw, but loathe to lose.” He was still “banking on triangular diplomacy and the hole card of airpower to retrieve victory from the jaws of defeat” (Kimball, 1998, pp. 240, 285). If Nixon had served out his term, surely he would again have launched B-52 strikes in 1975 in defense of the South Vietnamese Government. When Gerald Ford did not respond in force to prevent the disappearance of the Saigon regime, an era came to a close.

“Right” and “Left” Explanations on the Margins

The history of US intervention demonstrates that every president from Roosevelt to Nixon contributed to a consistent policy orientation. Archimedes Patti and John Foster Dulles and Curtis LeMay and George Ball and Averill Harriman and Henry Kissinger were all part of the team. Ad hominem explanations do not, cannot, account for this uniformity. So it seems worthwhile to take another look at systemic interpretations and to ask why they have ceased to enjoy much currency.

Vietnam War scholars have tabled Cold War orthodoxy. In his defense of US intervention, Guenter Lewy (1978) occasionally mutters about international communism, but for the most part his book argues that the war was decided within South Vietnam. Other conservative treatments (Podhoretz, 1983; Joes, 2001) take a similar approach, showing minimal interest in the external aspect, while asserting that Vietnamese communism on its own posed a challenge, more moral than strategic, that the United Stages could and should have met.

R. B. Smith is more insistent on the “international” aspect. “Sino-Soviet talks in September and October [1960] appear to have succeeded in narrowing the differences between the two principal Parties,” he suggests. Of course, this was the moment when the gravity of the quarrel within the socialist bloc was becoming apparent. But “it is important not to underestimate the degree of genuine unity that emerged, which was none the less real for being shortlived.” A putative consensus was spelled out at the Moscow Conference of Communist Parties in December, and Khrushchev’s speech of the following month “seemed to accept” the desirability of “national liberation” wars. Smith goes on to state, “The Vietnamese struggle might even become a logical focus for international solidarity within the ‘socialist camp,’ despite continuing Sino-Soviet differences on other issues.” “Given all this,” he hazards, “it was difficult for the Americans to regard” the NLF “as anything more or less than a specific application of the international Communist line contained in the Moscow Statement”(Smith, 1983, vol. 1, pp. 224–5, emphases added).

Smith’s analysis often relies on conjecture of this sort, a tentative address that may explain why it is not more frequently cited in other works on the war. But at least he presents an ambitious and scholarly treatment, worth consulting. By contrast, John Lewis Gaddis comments on Vietnam only in passing. After claiming that Chinese support was “maybe even the critical reason” for Viet Minh victory over the French, he concedes that “paradoxically” the USSR and the PRC worked at the Geneva Conference to prevent Vietnamese communism from extending its “triumph south of the
17th parallel” (Gaddis, 1997, p. 186). Readers of William Duiker’s measured and richly researched biography of Ho Chi Minh (2000) are likely to wince when Gaddis assigns Ho to a rogues gallery of “all the little Stalins and Mao’s,” “brutal romantics” who “promised liberation for their peoples but delivered repression” (Gaddis, 1993, p. 11).

Name-calling figures even more prominently in Michael Lind’s recent book. Lind echoes Gaddis in declaring that Ho was “a minor clone of the major communist tyrants,” then, for good measure, compares him to Franco and Mussolini as well (Lind, 1999, p. 42). Who knows what the next generation of research will bring. But for the time being, when it comes to understanding the Vietnam War, the “Foreign Other” is in limbo.

Echoes of the anti-imperialist critique of the 1960s are more frequently, but not much more frequently, heard in the literature. A review of the Indonesian case illustrates the point. There, in 1965, half a million leftists were killed by death squads linked to the armed forces. Lyndon Johnson later argued that this defeat of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) “would probably never have occurred” if not for his Vietnam escalation. The American “policy of helping those who wished to remain free and who were willing to help themselves” emboldened “the brave men who put their lives on the line” in Indonesia (Johnson, 1971, p. 357).

Perhaps the PKI would have been crushed even if the United States had not escalated. It is also true that Johnson’s comment is self-serving, not to say brutal (“we regretted the bloodshed involved,” he notes in an aside). Still, LBJ provides a plausible explanation for what “credibility” was all about and raises the prospect that Indonesia 1965 has something to do with the Vietnam War. Could one of the lessons of Vietnam have been that no amount of “bloodshed” was too great for the United States when it came to backing allies “willing to help themselves”?

Persuaded that LBJ’s hypothesis warrants attention, R. B. Smith is one of the few scholars to examine it in detail. The United States aimed “to defeat any attempt by the Communist powers to draw individual countries away from existing political and economic relations with the West,” he affirms. “In that context the most important country in the region was not South Vietnam but Indonesia.” Declining to acknowledge that mass murder was the instrument (“a military campaign to restore full control – that is to suppress the PKI” is as far as he is willing to go), Smith notes that the liquidation of the Indonesian left was seen as “a welcome change” by the Americans, one which “held out the possibility of a return to regional stability in South-East Asia, allowing the adoption of measures conducive to the kind of economic development” that they desired. Positing a domino theory in reverse, he links the elimination of the PKI to Washington’s “grand design,” which was to mobilize “the whole of South-East Asia (except for North Vietnam) into an anti-Communist, anti-Chinese alliance” (Smith, 1985, vol. 2, p. 14; 1991, vol. 3, pp. 208, 210).

Gabriel Kolko agrees with Smith that the United States placed a high strategic and economic value on Indonesia and thought that its future would be influenced by what happened in Vietnam. But Kolko goes further, in order to emphasize US complicity with the massacre. Cable traffic between the US Embassy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk makes clear that the Americans were “generally sympathetic with and admiring of what [the] army [is] doing.” When killing with knives and other primitive implements yielded a disappointing murder rate, the United States
promised to send communications equipment and small arms, “dubbed ‘medicines’ to prevent embarrassing revelations” (Kolko, 1988, p. 181).

Kolko’s Anatomy of a War ([1985] 1994) might have been expected to pursue the point. But while it is a great book indeed on the Saigon milieu and an important book on the Vietnamese Revolution, its treatment of the US aspect is modest in scope. Not pausing overlong over markets and raw materials, Kolko shows more interest in “inherited geopolitical frustrations and conventional class wisdom” (p. 195), which precluded strategic thinking about the Vietnam battlefield and about economic costs and benefits as well.

A sense of how Vietnam fit into a larger perception of interests is implicit in Confronting the Third World (1988), which appeared three years after the first edition of Anatomy and was perhaps intended by Kolko as a companion volume to it. But the connections are not spelled out in the later work, leaving readers to imagine what a continent-wide interpretation of the Vietnam War might look like. In the chapter on Indonesia 1965, cited above, Vietnam is mentioned only in passing, and there is no testing of President Johnson’s hypothesis on the link between the two.

When Michael Schaller (1982) and Andrew Rotter (1987) established that concern for Japanese recovery influenced Washington’s thinking about Southeast Asia in the late 1940s, and when Paul Joseph (1981) and Gabriel Kolko (1994) demonstrated that economic pressures turned large segments of the capitalist class against the war in 1968, these affirmations worked their way into the treatments put forward by other scholars. But there is no study of economic considerations prompting Kennedy in 1961 or Johnson in 1965. As for Nixon, Jeffrey Kimball notes that in 1970 “even loyal Republican corporate executives were expressing a longing for peace” (Kimball, 1998, p. 176). But he does not say anything about the impact of such sentiments on the president. The anti-imperialist interpretation of US intervention remains stillborn.

Conclusion

In The Perfect War (1986), James William Gibson developed another kind of critical thinking about US intervention. While Robert Buzzanco and H. R. McMaster examine conflicts between military and civilian leaders, Gibson probes for the logic underlying perceptions of war-making that were common to the Pentagon and the White House. According to his analysis, the American way of fighting in Vietnam, which Gibson calls “technowar,” was rooted in a corporate and political culture going back to World War II.

“Technowar” remains a strikingly ambitious formulation, with more explanatory power than, say, “dereliction of duty.” But The Perfect War has made little impact on the Vietnam field. It could be that the same fate awaits studies by Mark Bradley and Robert Dean, which also offer a social interpretation of policymaking and bring back into discussion racism and imperialism and other conceptions once deployed by the left of the anti-war movement. Or perhaps, after recent calls for new departures (Appy, 2000; Rotter, 2000), there will be a more receptive audience for such approaches.

I hope these breakthroughs will be followed up in future work. Some might call this a “cultural turn,” a usage I resist because it implies a gap between the “cultural”
and the “material,” when the point is to see how these spheres are indissoluble and constitutive elements, shaping the behavior of policymakers. Worries about Indonesian communism and worries about toughness came into their minds from the same historical experience, and “credibility” is misconstrued if either the global (“dominos”) or the affective (“machismo”) is left out. Our picture of Vietnam War decisionmaking will remain unfinished if the presidents are not positioned within society, which imposes on all who seek to make history its own conceptions of interest and power.

REFERENCES


