

The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era

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The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era, by Mark Atwood Lawrence. Princeton University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9780691126401, 408 pages (hardcover).

By the late 1960s, the American war in Vietnam became the dominant foreign policy issue for U.S. officials and ever-larger portions of the American public. But as Mark Atwood Lawrence describes in his excellent new book *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*, escalating U.S. military involvement in South Vietnam occurred in the midst of a significant shift in U.S. policy toward the decolonized world. When the decade began, newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy and many of his advisers were eager to use American power and resources to promote economic and political change in Latin America, southern Africa, and Southeast Asia, regions they labeled as part of the “developing” or “Third World.” But these hopes were never fully realized while Kennedy was in office, and U.S. policy underwent a gradual but significant change under his replacement, Lyndon B. Johnson. As U.S. military operations in Vietnam expanded, the President and other U.S. officials became much more willing to work with authoritarian leaders if their actions served U.S. interests and much less tolerant of dissent or criticism of the United States by Third-World leaders. This shift continued under Richard Nixon and shaped U.S. foreign policy for the rest of the Cold War and into the 21st century.

Lawrence, a historian of U.S. foreign relations at the University of Texas at Austin and currently the director of the Johnson Presidential Library and Museum, has written several books on the international dimensions of the Vietnam War.¹ Drawing on extensive research in

¹ See Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) and *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

numerous archives, especially U.S. published and archival collections, Lawrence argues that the war played a key role in curtailing American liberals' aspirations to transform the U.S. relationship with the Third World and integrate emerging nations into an anticommunist and American-led international order. When U.S. troop levels reached more than 500,000 in 1968 and combat operations became ever-more intense and destructive, the war placed a heavy burden on American military and economic resources. As casualties on all sides mounted and the U.S. seemed no closer to achieving its objectives, criticism of the war (and by extension American foreign policy in the Third World) grew at home and abroad. But instead of calling the Vietnam War the only factor behind the shift toward supporting authoritarian regimes, Lawrence posits that the war acted as an accelerant alongside several other factors, including changes in American leadership, political turmoil in the U.S., and polarization in the Third World.²

The first three chapters of *The End of Ambition* provide an overview of the Kennedy and Johnson foreign policies, laying out the changes and continuities in personnel and policy during each administration. In the process, Lawrence shows how individuals occupying senior government positions altered the substance of U.S. foreign policy. Though both men were liberal Democrats who campaigned on the same ticket in the 1960 presidential election, they held different views on many key issues, including foreign policy. Kennedy emphasized foreign policy above all else as president, was genuinely interested in the Third World, and surrounded himself with advisers who held a range of views on how the United States should deal with those countries. Upon assuming office in January 1961, Kennedy and many of his senior advisers wanted to use American power and resources to support emerging nations around the world. But this rhetoric seldom translated into actual policy. As Lawrence writes, the Kennedy administration “conceived of no consistent or coherent approach to the Third World generally or to specific challenges that arose on its watch” and left Kennedy’s successor with “a muddled set of policies that offered no blueprint for the future.”³

² Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 5-6.

³ Lawrence, *The End of Ambition*, 17.

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Unlike Kennedy, Johnson was much more interested in domestic affairs than foreign policy, and surrounded himself with advisers who shared his views. He was also determined to transform the United States through major civil rights reforms and a host of government programs under the Great Society, priorities that mattered more to the President than most foreign policy concerns. As a result, U.S. policy underwent a gradual but distinct shift as Johnson and his advisers “chose again and again to lower American ambitions in the Third World, to reduce risk of setbacks, and to shore up Washington’s control of global affairs by establishing or bolstering regimes that promised to cooperate with the United States.”⁴ Crucially, this trend did not end when Lyndon Johnson left office; on the contrary, it became the basis for his successor’s much-touted “Nixon Doctrine.”

The next five chapters are case studies of four individual countries (Brazil, India, Iran, and Indonesia) and one region (southern Africa) in which Lawrence explores how the shift from enthusiastic (if often frustrated) engagement with the Third World under Kennedy toward a less-ambitious policy in the Third World under Johnson played out in specific places. Events in each locale played out in different ways based on specific circumstances. In Brazil (Chapter 4), the U.S. came to enthusiastically support the country’s military regime, despite its increasingly anti-democratic conduct and proximity to U.S. shores. In India (Chapter 5), the U.S. relationship with New Delhi deteriorated quickly as Indian leaders’ criticisms of the U.S. war in Vietnam increased after 1965.

On the other hand, the U.S. relationship with Iran under the shah only grew closer during the second half of the 1960s (Chapter 6). Unlike Brazil, the Johnson administration had fewer qualms about supporting a distant authoritarian regime under a leader who enthusiastically touted his country as a regional surrogate for the U.S. in the strategically vital Persian Gulf; throughout the 1960s Johnson developed a warm personal relationship with the shah, whom he respected as a fellow proponent of state-led reform.⁵ In Indonesia (Chapter 7), U.S. officials worried that the country was drifting toward communist China, but those fears gradually

⁴ Lawrence, *The End of Ambition*, 80.

⁵ Lawrence, *The End of Ambition*, 178.

disappeared as a brutal military regime consolidated power (with U.S. assistance) after 1965.

Southern Africa (Chapter 8) had long been a low priority for U.S. national security, but tensions between black African independence movements, current and former European colonial powers, and white settler regimes became enmeshed with rising racial tensions at home in the United States. As Johnson's civil rights agenda became increasingly controversial at home in the late 1960s, U.S. policy in the region became enmeshed in American domestic politics like none of the other countries discussed in *The End of Ambition*. Faced with an expanding and increasingly controversial war in Vietnam, U.S. officials mostly followed the lead of European allies and NATO members like Great Britain and did not take strong actions against white-controlled governments in Rhodesia and South Africa. For all their individual variations, one theme unites all five case studies: despite tough rhetoric and threats to reduce or cut off American economic and military aid, local factors played a greater role in shaping events than did American pressure.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given his focus on U.S. policymakers and use of U.S. government sources, Lawrence writes that the U.S. decision to temper its ambitions in the Third World was driven by a rational calculation of U.S. interests in a specific historical moment, and not by malevolence on the part of American officials.⁶ While this language risks coming across as overly sympathetic, Lawrence is quick to note that, while these policies might have served U.S. interests in the short-term, they all had negative long-term consequences. The author's emphasis on American actors and reliance on U.S. government sources also means that the voices and perspectives of Brazilian, Indian, Indonesia, Iranian, and African leaders and observers are largely absent. But this is a limitation, not a flaw, as Lawrence's efforts to illuminate U.S. officials' positions and perspectives compliment studies that de-center the United States in the history of the Cold War.⁷ *The End of Ambition* will be invaluable to scholars

⁶ Lawrence, *The End of Ambition*, 4 and 307.

⁷ See, for instance, Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and *The Cold War: A World History* (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Cold War's Killing Fields: Rethinking the Long Peace* (New York:

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of Pacific history who want to understand how domestic and bureaucratic forces shaped U.S. foreign policy in the region during the 1960s.

HarperCollins Publishers, 2018); and Lorenz M. Luthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).