

Jonathan Colman. *The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B. Johnson: The United States and the World, 1963-1969*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 231pp.

Ben Offiler\*

University of Nottingham

The history of United States foreign relations appears destined to follow a well established pattern: the traditional or orthodox rendering is followed by a revisionist reading that is typically and in turn eventually followed by the post-revisionists. The foreign policies of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon have already begun the revisionist process and in recent years Lyndon B. Johnson's administration has joined this trend, which this book fits neatly into.<sup>1</sup>

As Dr Jonathan Colman notes, where Johnson's domestic affairs have received widespread praise, the legacy of his foreign policy has languished in the quagmire of Vietnam. Indeed, a central pillar of Colman's thesis, in addition to presenting what he acknowledges is "perhaps the most sympathetic general account to date of Johnson's foreign policies," is his argument that "the escalation of the US commitment in Vietnam was a rational and well-considered policy." (4) Considering that Vietnam was the most controversial feature of LBJ's foreign policy it is unsurprising that Colman's comparatively positive appraisal is likely to be met with scepticism by some readers. The author cites the perception within the White House that American credibility was at stake in Vietnam as the primary motivation for intervention, suggesting this was a "reasonable concern" (24) given America's previous rhetoric about communist encroachment in Southeast Asia. In addition, the Johnson administration was driven by a belief in the veracity of the domino theory, which argued that if one country should fall to communism, then so too would its neighbours and so on. Colman is also right to reject Walt Rostow's assertion that the economic progress of

---

\* Ben Offiler is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Nottingham. His research explores the relations between the United States and Iran between 1961 and 1972. Ben can be contacted at [aaabo@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:aaabo@nottingham.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Thomas Schwartz, *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Mitchell Lerner, "A Big Tree of Peace and Justice': The Vice Presidential Travels of Lyndon Johnson," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 2010), 357-393; Kristin L. Ahlberg, "Machiavelli with a Heart': The Johnson Administration's Food for Peace Program in India, 1965-1966," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (September 2007), 665-701.

South Vietnam's neighbours should be attributed to the United States' willingness to stem the tide of communism, noting the fallacy of this kind of reasoning. (67) Even so, the author appears to undermine his own argument somewhat by acknowledging that both domestic and international support for the escalation was tepid at best. Can a policy that lacked convincing support at home and abroad really be "rational and well-considered"? The author also appears to take at face value the rationale of American policymakers' obsession with credibility without really interrogating whether this ought to have been a valid consideration. Why did policymakers assume America's credibility would be so damaged if South Vietnam fell to communism? Was this based on reasonable assumptions? Had LBJ not escalated the US military commitment in Vietnam, would America's credibility have been damaged the way officials feared, and, even if it was, would this have really mattered in the grander schemes of US-Soviet relations?

Where the book is perhaps stronger is in the remaining chapters, emphasising LBJ's successes on a wide range of issues, including US relations with France, Britain, Europe and NATO; the Soviet Union and Communist China; the Middle East; Latin America; and trade policy. For a book that, excluding the bibliography and index, only covers 209 pages this is an ambitious undertaking. Whilst this is an admirable trait it also necessitates the neglect of some subjects. For instance, the chapter on the Middle East deliberately takes two regional crises as its focus, that of Cyprus in 1964 and the Six Day War in 1967. Here Colman argues that Lyndon Johnson's policies helped to keep a lid on the Cyprus crisis, preventing it from escalating, and also managed to keep the Arab-Israeli conflict from damaging the nascent detente he had been fostering with the Soviet Union. However, one is left wondering whether this gives a full sense of the Johnson administration's relations with the Middle East as a whole; just as Vietnam was not the only important Asian country, Israel was not the only important Middle Eastern country. Iran, Pakistan and India each get only a single mention throughout and only then in passing reference to Vietnam or, in the case of Iran, the 1953 CIA coup. Yet it is during this decade that Washington became inextricably tied to Teheran, setting precedents followed right up until the Islamic Revolution demonstrated the inherent flaws in a policy that relied solely on a dictatorial regime. US relations with Pakistan and India, both increasingly vital in light of the rise of Communist China, underwent difficult negotiation due to America's neutral stance in the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War, further complicated by diplomatic efforts such as the Food for Peace Programme in India and, as

Andrew Rotter has argued, the cultural preference in Washington for Pakistan over India.<sup>2</sup> Despite this criticism, the author does provide some useful insights into President Johnson's policy towards Europe and NATO, which help to consolidate the book's thesis that there was more to LBJ's foreign policy than Vietnam.

*The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B. Johnson* is, overall, a very worthwhile contribution to foreign relations literature. For students of US foreign relations it offers an interesting and broad introduction to the Johnson administration's attempts to grapple with world issues. For scholars and historians it presents a new perspective on Johnson. Colman's portrayal is not just of the President who led the United States, and more damningly the Vietnamese people, into a devastating war, but of a President who maintained good relations with America's European allies despite many difficulties, reduced the likelihood of a US-Soviet conflict following the Six Day War and intervened in the Dominican Republic in a timely and appropriate manner. Many readers will disagree with some, or even all, of this book's thesis, yet Dr Colman's conclusions and the questions they raise deserve attention and help to steer the debates around LBJ's foreign policy to new pastures.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ahlberg, "Machiavelli with a Heart." On the impact of cultural factors on American attitudes towards Pakistan and India, see Andrew J. Rotter, *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947-1964* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).