



# BOOK REVIEW:

**Lawrence, Mark Atwood. *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. 408 pages. ISBN: 978-0-6911-2604-01.**

The impact of few American foreign wars has been studied as intensively as the Vietnam War. Scholars of political history, international relations, military history, presidential studies, film and cultural studies, and memory studies (just to mention a few) have focused on the impact of Vietnam for decades, trying to understand the invasive influence of the America's first lost war on not just politics, but on the national psyche. According to Mark Atwood Lawrence's newest contribution to his already impressive scholarship on the US foreign relations and the Third World, the significant shift in US politics happened not after the war, but in the transition from the Kennedy to Johnson Administrations.

Lawrence's book is a welcome addition to foreign policy history, focusing specifically on the US' use of democracy and economic progress as tools of foreign policy in the Third World. The author has chosen case studies to represent different regions - Brazil (Latin America), India and Indonesia (Asia), Iran (the Middle East), and Southern Rhodesia (Africa). While internal developments in Third

World countries are touched upon as causes of change, the main focus remains with the US, with leaders and their policy-making frameworks. A framework that rewarded loyalty to the US and stability, frequently at the expense of genuine democratic development. This book tells the story of the foreign policies of Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon, and how Vietnam changed the policies towards the Third World.

At the time of this book's chronological beginning (1960), the post-colonial Third World was increasingly in focus as the battleground for US-Soviet power struggles. President Kennedy considered self-determination, democracy, and economic progress to be America's gift to the Third World, and they became its weapons of choice in convincing former colonies of particularly Africa and Asia to choose America's side in the Cold War. The author's introduction quotes Democratic Senator Frank Church as saying, in 1971, that the decade started on an optimistic note, but ended in abject failure. While the Presidents

themselves provide ideological frameworks for the approaches of their administrations, much of the analysis focuses on various levels of policy making, the personal experiences of policy makers and their competing goals.

Lawrence's contribution to an already busy field of scholarship on US foreign relations in the 1960s is the analysis of the why's and how's of American policy making towards the Third World. America's strategy towards post-colonial countries changed, reflecting not just foreign policy choices, but also domestic developments. Thus America's perception of its own global role was a reaction to events both abroad and at home. The three Presidents studied here follow the narrative established by a host of scholars: Kennedy as the most ambitious on foreign policy, genuinely interested in supporting self-determination in the Third World; Johnson as preoccupied with the Great Society on the home front and with little personal interest in foreign policy, and finally Nixon as the pragmatist, more interested in power balance than idealist causes. Lawrence argues here that Kennedy is the odd one out, as there was little fundamental change in outlook or policy in the transition from the Democratic Johnson to the Republican Nixon.

Structured around the five case studies and based on extensive primary source research in presidential and State Department archives, Lawrence's book is convincing and well-balanced in its writing. While the main argument of US emphasizing regional stability over democratic development is hardly a new

one in foreign policy scholarship, Lawrence brings light to the high level of ambition of Kennedy's doctrine. However, the trials of Vietnam led to other Presidents choosing a more cautious approach, abandoning the confident optimism of the early 1960s, and this book offers welcome details of the policy interests and negotiations behind it.

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