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REVIEW ESSAY

THE GI GENERATION AND THE VIETNAM WAR

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Kaiser, David. *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000. 566pp. \$29.95

Twenty-five years after the fall of Saigon, it seems doubtful that historians will ever achieve consensus on America's experience in Vietnam. In recent years, newly available evidence has reinvigorated the debate over how and why Vietnam became an American war. David Kaiser, a professor of strategy and policy at the Naval War College, has produced the most recent examination of that question. In *American Tragedy*, Kaiser devotes the first nine chapters to the Kennedy years. The last seven chapters cover the period from November 1963 (John Kennedy's assassination) to July 1965, when Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, made a series of decisions that led to an American war in Vietnam.

Kaiser, an accomplished historian of Europe and the author of many books, describes his latest work as "the most thorough and best documented account of America's decision to go to war in Vietnam." Indeed, Kaiser's book is well researched, and he draws heavily on recently declassified memoranda, tapes of telephone conversations, and minutes of meetings. Vietnam specialists and students of the war will benefit from both Kaiser's evidence and his provocative interpretation of how Kennedy and Johnson confronted the complex military and political challenges of Vietnam.

Somewhat disconnected from the evidence, however, is Kaiser's generational explanation for Lyndon Johnson's decisions. He asserts that LBJ and his advisors, as members of the "GI generation," possessed "relentless optimism" and a firm belief that American power could solve the problem of Vietnam just as it

had solved the problem of Nazi and Japanese aggression in World War II. He portrays Kennedy as an exception to the generational rule, implying strongly that JFK, had he lived, would have steered the United States away from war in Vietnam.

In his first chapter, Kaiser argues that President Dwight Eisenhower laid the intellectual foundation and policy precedent for an American war in Southeast Asia. Kaiser states that Kennedy acted as a moderating influence against intervention after he inherited from Eisenhower a deteriorating situation in Laos and Vietnam. He portrays Kennedy as a “brilliant natural diplomat,” “more sensitive to the dangers of rash action than the contemporaries he chose as his leading subordinates.”

While Kaiser emphasizes Kennedy’s decision against a potentially disastrous intervention in Laos in 1961, Kennedy’s foreign policy record and the legacy of his Vietnam decisions cut against the argument. Kennedy’s greatest foreign policy disaster, the Bay of Pigs, receives little attention, and Kaiser describes Kennedy’s embarrassing encounter with Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961 as merely a “difficult experience.” Although Kennedy did disapprove a recommendation to send American combat units to South Vietnam in 1961, he dramatically increased the American advisor effort there, from eight hundred at the time of his inauguration to 16,500 in November 1963.

Kaiser does not examine fully the most significant decision Kennedy made about Vietnam—to instigate and support a coup that led to the overthrow of the South Vietnamese government and the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu. Kaiser argues that “without question, the two men most responsible for the overthrow of the Diem government” were Diem and Nhu themselves. The Kennedy administration, however, permitted the CIA and Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge to engineer the coup and thereby saddled the United States with responsibility for the successor regime. The coup exacerbated political instability in South Vietnam and presented Vietnamese communists with an opportunity to exploit. Kaiser praises Kennedy for his “detachment, curiosity, and quick intelligence,” but the president’s failure to provide direction and to make a clear decision about the coup revealed a remarkable degree of neglect, indecisiveness, and an absolute failure to consider long-term consequences.

Kaiser contrasts Kennedy’s and Johnson’s approach to Vietnam and argues that LBJ took “a much more straightforward approach” than Kennedy to the containment of communism. Kennedy, however, was a reflexive anticommunist; in the late 1940s, then-Congressman Kennedy befriended and allied himself with America’s most avid “Red” hunter, Senator Joseph McCarthy. Much of the evidence that Kaiser presents to demonstrate LBJ’s “straightforward approach” comes from public statements that Johnson used as president to portray himself as a tough and determined leader in the realm of foreign policy. Those statements, however, were wholly inconsistent with LBJ’s reluctance

even to discuss Vietnam policy with his advisors. Any comparison between administrations in connection with Vietnam is likely to be fraught with difficulty. The situation in Southeast Asia changed dramatically over time, and it depended much less upon who occupied the White House than on the political and military interaction between Vietnamese communists and South Vietnamese loyal to the Saigon government.

How each administration coped with the changing situation in Vietnam depended upon many factors, including its appreciation of the situation; individual character and experience; national, institutional, and individual interests; relationships among the president's advisers and their relative influence; and perceptions of potential short and long-term consequences of competing courses of action. While the evidence Kaiser presents illuminates many of these factors, he relies overwhelmingly on the generational explanation. Under the author's construct, the war seems inevitable, and those who shaped the course of the war escape responsibility—their generation made them do it.

Kaiser argues that the GI generation's faith in America's ability to prevail generated overconfidence and impelled LBJ and his advisers toward war. However, as early as May 1964, Johnson told his national security adviser, McGeorge Bundy, "[It] looks to me that we're getting into another Korea. It just worries the hell out of me. I don't see what we can ever hope to get out of this." Vietnam was, Johnson exclaimed, "the biggest damn mess that I ever saw." The president's lack of confidence and a pessimism that bordered on defeatism among many of his advisers in both the Defense Department and the White House brings into question the usefulness of generational determinism to explain America's military escalation in Vietnam. The paradox represented by Johnson's premonition of disaster and his subsequent decisions that moved the United States closer to war stemmed from factors more specific and complex than a generational proclivity, including Johnson's preoccupation with domestic priorities, his character, and the character of his principal advisers, as well as advisory relationships within the administration.

Kaiser's research led him to devote more attention than have most historians to the critical decisions of 1964—decisions that placed the United States firmly on the path toward a gradual escalation of American intervention in Vietnam. While his emphasis on those early decisions is appropriate, the evidence does not support the author's conclusion that they reveal a firm commitment on the part of the president to preserve an independent, noncommunist South Vietnam. America's objectives in Vietnam remained ambiguous and ill defined during the entire period of escalation. Lyndon Johnson was preoccupied with preserving the consensus on Vietnam and preventing a debate that might affect his domestic priorities. He was determined to tell both those opposed to a greater military

commitment and those who advocated resolute military action what they wanted to hear. It was a consensus built on a fragile foundation of lies and obfuscation.

Kaiser points out the fundamental dishonesty of Johnson's approach, but he does not examine fully the consequences. Those who did not tell the president what he wanted to hear were relegated to positions of little influence. Over time, it became difficult for the president to distinguish the administration's propaganda from reality in Vietnam. Johnson considered alternatives to a slow military escalation only to preserve the façade of debate and consultation. Lies to Congress permitted his administration to circumvent the Constitution—behavior that not only was undemocratic but also removed an important corrective to what was an unwise policy. The war was not inevitable; it was made possible by the Johnson administration's dissembling.

Despite the sometimes tenuous connection between Kaiser's conclusions and the evidence he presents, the author deserves credit for doing thorough research and for advancing a provocative argument. Indeed, Kaiser's generational interpretation of how and why Vietnam became an American war is not without explanatory power; it is worthy of serious attention. Students of the war will benefit from comparing Kaiser's arguments to those of such historians as Lloyd Gardner and Michael Hunt, who place less emphasis on generational proclivities and a greater emphasis on America's Cold War ideology of containing communism.