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## America's Third World

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*America's Third World*

Robert Rakove's *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* is an ambitious reassessment of U.S. policy toward the nonaligned world during the 1960s. Drawing on copious research in U.S. government archives, the book looks at 'engagement,' a previously unnamed doctrine that Rakove feels oriented John F. Kennedy's foreign policy. In this retelling, Kennedy was a wise and prudent president—fully capable of separating communism from nationalism in the Third World—who spearheaded an unprecedented outreach effort toward neutral countries after 1961. This offensive marked a genuine departure from the Manichean tendencies of the time, Rakove argues, and while Kennedy's efforts carried certain misconceptions, the President was "right to regard nonalignment seriously in his day." Today's policymakers "would be equally prudent to study it closely in ours (264)."

Rakove's thesis engages two interlocking historiographical debates. First, the author revisits the controversy around Fredrik Logevall's landmark *Choosing War*.<sup>1</sup> That book, which devoted some 400 pages to the "Long 1964"—the year when Lyndon B. Johnson americanized the Vietnam War—hinted suggestively that Kennedy's diplomatic acumen might have led the United States down a different path in Southeast Asia. Whereas the thirty-fifth president was an original thinker who saw the world in shades of gray and engaged statesmen with different views and political agendas, his successor was a Washington insider who extended his transactional understanding of politics into the international arena.<sup>2</sup> Accepting this distinction, Rakove surveys Kennedy's policies in Africa and Asia in order to explicate precisely how Johnson's ascension altered the calculus around U.S. policy toward the nonaligned world. The resulting narrative nudges the reader toward Logevall's provocative conclusion. Had Lee Harvey Oswald missed, it's entirely possible that the Vietnam War would not have happened.

Second, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* engages the debate around Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War*.<sup>3</sup> Westad's book effectively reimagined the Cold War as a contest between two global empires—organized by potent yet incompatible theories of modernization—which played out as a series of overlapping military interventions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For Westad, Vietnam was the emblematic midpoint in an era defined by relentless warfare, revolutionary rhetoric, and broken dreams.<sup>4</sup> Rakove has no

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Logevall, chap. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Westad, chap. 5.

time for theory, which is unfortunate, but he's eager to complicate Westad's grand narrative by showing the explanatory limitations of ideology. 'Engagement' is Rakove's conceptual counterpoint to intervention, and *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* subtly challenges *The Global Cold War's* middle chapters, specifically their emphasis on Cuba and Vietnam. Rakove's Kennedy viewed Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh not as existential threats but as single trees in a large, complex forest that needed to be treated with respect, tact, and patience. In exploring this forest—detailing the way U.S. policymakers addressed wide-ranging problems in Ghana, Egypt, Indonesia, and India, among other countries—Rakove casts the Kennedy team as flawed yet flexible. These were not mandarins of modernization, but apostles of pragmatism.

Rakove assembles his puzzle with admirable creativity. *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* opens and closes with contextual explanations of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vietnam, but the book's core chapters—where the author does his most original thinking and researching—review the conferences, crises, and meetings where U.S. officials worked out their understanding of nonalignment. Rakove begins by unfurling the personalities and ideas of the New Frontiersmen, placing the President's advisors in different groups. The National Security Council's McGeorge Bundy and Robert Komer were the administration's clear-eyed crisis managers; Undersecretary of State Chester Bowles, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Mennen Williams, and U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson were the energetic idealists (with the NSC's Walt Rostow providing an economic viewpoint); and Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Under Secretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs George Ball were the Europhiles, constantly checking the enthusiasm of their colleagues.<sup>5</sup> Although Kennedy never explicated a grand strategy toward nonalignment, Rakove argues that the President used engagement to hold this team together, a policy which worked until Johnson arrived in the White House in late 1963. A less dexterous thinker, the new President let his insecurities erode the creative tension of the New Frontier.

To substantiate these claims, *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* walks the reader through a series of thematic case studies. Focused roughly on 1961-1964, each chapter compares Kennedy and Johnson, contrasting the former's willingness to build relationships with neutral countries with the latter's ham-fisted insistence on rewarding supporters and punishing critics. Kennedy's patience took many forms. For instance, Rakove shows how

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<sup>5</sup> As Rakove explains, these figures played various roles during the Kennedy and Johnson years. Bundy was the White House's National Security Advisor until 1966; Komer served on his staff during that time and helped shape NSC policy toward nonaligned questions, before eventually getting involved in the Vietnam pacification campaigns of 1967-68. Bowles began 1961 as Undersecretary of State, but lost that position in December and served out the decade as the President's Special Adviser on African, Asian, and Latin American Affairs, an Ambassador-at-Large, and eventually U.S. Ambassador to India. Williams was Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs until 1966; Stevenson was U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations until his death in 1965. Rostow played a variety of roles on the NSC before replacing Bundy as Johnson's National Security Advisor in 1966. Rusk was Secretary of State for both Kennedy and Johnson. Ball was Undersecretary of State for Economic and Agricultural Affairs and became Undersecretary of State after Bowles removal. He served briefly as U.N. Ambassador in 1968.

the administration used bilateral meetings with nonaligned leaders to rehabilitate Washington's standing after the 1961 Belgrade conference, a major gathering among nonaligned countries. He also illustrates the way the President used compromise and symbolism to chart a middle path through colonial conflicts and regional disputes in Africa and Asia. Rakove even uses a chapter on American aid to demonstrate the gap between Kennedy's strategic generosity and Johnson's capricious parsimony. The New Frontier's successes were not unqualified; anticolonial sentiment and regional strife, especially in Africa, pushed the administration into numerous no-win situations in these years. But the breaking point did not arrive until 1964. On Vietnam, Kennedy simply "would not have rejected the counsel of nonaligned leaders and allies as vehemently or as punitively as Johnson did (257)." Rakove's emphasis underscores his book's ultimate conclusion: Johnson's war constituted a "repudiation" of his predecessor's legacy.

*Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* is impressively researched and provocatively argued. It deserves to be near the center of any scholarly discussion about the Vietnam War and U.S. policy toward nonalignment. The author moves comfortably through a dizzying number of bilateral relationships, exploring the U.S.-Togo connection with the same nuance he devotes to Kennedy's outreach in India, Egypt, and Indonesia. Rather than drawing on the secondary literature, Rakove's narrative is built around his impressive original research in the presidential libraries, the U.S. National Archive, and the relevant *FRUS* volumes, with some international research effectively blended into each chapter. This sort of synthesis—based on primary sources yet focused on several countries—is difficult and Rakove should be congratulated for his effort. The size and complexity of his archival evidence sets a standard for future scholars.

*Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* is not perfect. The book's organization lends itself to repetition and while Rakove's summary of the New Frontiersmen is useful, it sits awkwardly next to the messy realities he uncovers in his case studies. Komer, for instance, seems to have been pragmatic on some issues and idealistic on others, which prompts the question as to whether policymakers actually had a worldview on nonalignment or interlocking opinions about race, development, and neutrality that interacted as the world changed around them during the early 1960s. Rakove's use of personality archetypes allows him to avoid this question and simplify the way Kennedy's team actually built, maintained, and changed its interpersonal coalitions. The author's approach also distorts the role of context. His interpretation rests on the presupposition that "the challenges presented by nonaligned states in 1965 were not substantially different in character from what they had been in the 1950s (xxvii);" this in turn justifies his comparative analysis of Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, but confuses the differences between pan-Asianism, pan-Arabism, and pan-Africanism and masks how these ideologies evolved in the decade after 1955. Did nonalignment really remain static in the face of African decolonization and American civil rights? Rakove's book would have been even stronger if it had given more attention to nonalignment's fluidity, context, and contradictions.

The book's central contribution, however, is its explication of U.S. thinking and behavior. On this front, Rakove deserves credit for recovering an important dimension of Kennedy's diplomacy and buttressing one side of the debate about Vietnam. His argument will not

convince every skeptic, but it invites a fascinating riddle: would engagement have collapsed if Kennedy had lived? Rakove does not proffer an answer, but his evidence suggests that Kennedy's outreach had hit a wall by November 1963. A gap existed between Washington's capacities and the decolonized world's expectations, and the New Frontiersmen had cultivated an unrealistic mindset about economic development and political plurality. Rakove's ultimate conclusion—that Manichean thinking led Johnson astray—is true, of course, but it seems to imply that 'engaged' Washingtonians would have sailed smoothly through the rough waters of the mid-1960s. Certainly some of the powerbrokers that Rakove writes about would have agreed, but his premise ignores the contributions of those who study decolonization. This was a unique moment, rife with deeper ambiguities that many scholars are beginning to appreciate.

*Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* successfully illuminates U.S. policy toward neutral countries in the period just before the Vietnam War. In the coming years, scholars will hopefully build on Rakove's insights by raising new questions and utilizing novel historiographies. The international community has nearly quadrupled in size since 1945: what role has the United States played in shaping the intellectual contours and political contradictions of this process? How did neutrality and nonalignment interact with other contemporary internationalisms? Why did this interaction process change over time? Few books will tackle these questions without including *Kennedy, Johnson, and the Nonaligned World* in their footnotes. With verve and nuance, Rakove has written a useful and important diplomatic history of Kennedy's foreign policy. His book makes a lasting contribution to the evolving conversation about international life in the mid-twentieth century.