

A Roundtable on Mark Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*

Jason Parker, Gregg A. Brazinsky, Matthew F. Jacobs, Meredith Oyen, and Mark
Atwood Lawrence

Introduction to Mark Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*. Princeton University Press, 2021.

Jason Parker

For those of us Beatles devotees born after the band broke up, it is arresting to ponder that their period of regular- and then super-stardom lasted fewer years than many of us spent in grad school. That same feeling— of great distance traveled in what was in retrospect a short window of time— also strikes when we guide our students across the eight short years separating JFK’s Inaugural from the Nixon Doctrine. From “pay any price, bear any burden” to apocalyptic-scale nuclear arsenals and the Vietnam debacle in less than a decade is a rich, terrible, and bloody history, as the readers of these pages know well. Yet the quagmire in Southeast Asia tends to eclipse, for the LBJ administration then as for scholars now, contemporary developments in other parts of the much-contested and increasingly-assertive “Third World” in that era.

As one of our leading scholars of the Vietnam War, it is fitting and proper that it be Mark Lawrence to illuminate those global-South blind-spots that Vietnam eclipsed. Lawrence pursues several quarry at once in this book, which seeks to fill a gap in the literature and at the same time to connect dots in our interpretation of the 1960s. He argues that the shift from JFK to LBJ and thence to Nixon translated to a transition from hopeful engagement with global-South actors, centered on the modernization-development paradigm in vogue at the start of the decade, to its displacement by the prioritization of order and stability in these turbulent areas. This owed in part to the dynamics of the Vietnam War. It also stemmed, Lawrence finds, from idiosyncratic local factors in each state, as well as from the changing currents within the U.S. national-security establishment and in domestic American politics. In this elegant and well-constructed reading, the LBJ administration is the crucial bridge connecting the New Frontier to the Nixon Doctrine.

The three reviewers, although expressing some reservations, on the whole agree. They found much to praise in Lawrence’s book. It fills a gap in the modernization-development literature, noting that it offers a way to explain the “decline” phase following the well-covered “rise” in the works of Michael Latham, David Ekbladh, et al. The “demise of development” story, regionally strong in the works of such scholars as Brad Simpson and Thomas Field, here attains a global scope and reinforces the interpretation of the LBJ years as the aforementioned “bridge” to the Nixon Doctrine. It offers, in the words of one, a “strong

foundation” for further enhancement of our understanding of these crucial years. Moreover, it presents a model for analysis within the archival limitations under which we all live in the wake of Covid restrictions, and within its own compass, succeeds as an inside-baseball study of high policy in the shadow of Vietnam. It is, in the words of one reviewer, “readable, thoughtful, and persuasive”— an assessment with which I heartily concur.

The reviewers’ reservations—some shared by two or all three, others not—center for the most part on a few key issues. The intertwined issues of primary-source limitations and a focus on policy elites— bound up in the evidentiary base being overwhelmingly from the LBJ Library that Lawrence directs— are one. Another is the more or less incomplete picture, perhaps born of this inside-baseball focus, of the larger universe of bureaucratic aid and development.

Having taken on a life of its own by the end of the LBJ administration, the sector deserves attention as a virtually autonomous actor by that point. Independent by then of central administration directives, committed aid-and-development parties in Washington and abroad could and did pursue their work with only limited regard to shifts in presidential strategic thinking. Indeed, Lawrence’s book could offer a jumping-off point for future investigation of the “peak NGO” era that began to crest after it.¹ In addition, the inattention to human rights and racial dynamics in policymakers’ thinking during these years is ripe for redress in future scholarship. Finally, in perhaps the most provocative critique, Matt Jacobs wonders whether we ought instead to think about the JFK years as the aberration, leaving LBJ-Nixon as a kind of regression to the Cold War grand-strategy mean.

For those of us trained by scholars whose own autobiographies were shaped and scarred by the Vietnam years, the war’s “black hole” gravitational effect on their output and on U.S. foreign policy alike raised a question: once that generation passed the torch, would the war’s hold on the scholarship diminish? As it turns out, not so much— for Lawrence and others of the subsequent generation, the “black hole” continues to bend the very light around it. Yet Lawrence here makes a signal contribution by studying the places thus shadowed, even as the war’s utter centrality is confirmed. In his Conclusion, Lawrence argues that the arc of 1960s U.S. foreign policy tracks that long noted on the domestic front: from a robust liberalism to a resigned realism, as the former “crumbled under pressure from both a dissatisfied left that aimed for faster, more thoroughgoing change and a resurgent conservative movement.” The reviewers agree that he makes a convincing case in this regard, although one cheekily wonders whether it was as least as much due to the evident early failures of the New Frontier and Great Society alike to achieve their ambitious

goals. Dispiriting though it is to ponder, the leap from “All You Need Is Love” to “Helter Skelter” to “Get Back” turns out to be quick and short.

Note:

1. See for example Agnieszka Sobocinska, *Saving the World? Western Volunteers and the Rise of the Humanitarian-Development Complex* (Cambridge, 2021).

Review of Mark Atwood Lawrence: *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World during the Johnson Era*

Gregg A. Brazinsky

The study of American developmentalism in the Third World has occupied a prominent place in the historiography of U.S. foreign relations for over twenty years now. Historians in the field have examined the origins and implementation of a broad array of American efforts to promote economic development and democratization in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. These have included overarching studies of modernization as an ideology, studies of development policy in specific countries or regions, and explorations of how development programs played out in local contexts.¹

What historians have not devoted much attention to, however, is how and why the developmental zeal that seemed to be such a critical component of American foreign policy during the early 1960s faded and gave way to more conservative and realistic approaches toward the Third World by the end of the decade. There has been a vague sense that development programs withered quickly once Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in 1969, but no one has offered a detailed exploration of that process, and the notion that Nixon single-handedly dismantled what was at one point a far-reaching and well-funded development apparatus has long seemed a little bit too neat and convenient.

In *The End of Ambition*, Mark Atwood Lawrence offers a highly detailed and finely nuanced treatment of how the United States gradually abandoned its idealistic emphasis on transforming newly independent nations and shifted its focus to preserving stability and limiting expensive commitments to modernization schemes. Lawrence contends that there was not an abrupt transition from developmentalism to retrenchment in 1969. Instead, it was during the Johnson administration that Washington gave up its liberal aspirations, as policymakers struggled with the demands that war in Vietnam placed on America's resources.

The Vietnam War undermined progressive American visions of the Global South for several reasons. First, it had a dispiriting effect on U.S. policymakers and weakened their certainty about what American development programs could accomplish. Second, it fostered suspicion of Washington's motives in many neutral independent nations whose loyalty the United States was trying to win through development programs. Finally, it made it more difficult to justify the continuation of expensive programs in regions that seemed to be rejecting American influence.

Lawrence devotes three chapters to exploring the worldviews and assumptions of JFK, LBJ and their key advisors. One interesting takeaway from these chapters is that there was never a very uniform commitment to development and nation-building in the American

policy establishment—even during the early 1960s, when this outlook reached the pinnacle of its influence. The enthusiasm of “nation builders” such as Walt Rostow, Roger Hilsman, and David E. Bell was always kept in check by men like Secretary of State Dean Rusk and George W. Ball, who tended to view ambitious development schemes as unrealistic and grandiose.

Despite the optimism about the prospects for American influence in the Third World that he sometimes projected in his speeches, Kennedy often vacillated between the conflicting perspectives of his advisors. Thus, even during the Kennedy administration, American policy toward the Third World was not always as consistent and generous as the president's rhetoric indicated. Johnson inherited this ambiguous legacy and brought to it his own sense that while development aid was important, it was not necessarily a critical ingredient for victory in the Cold War.

At the heart of this book are Lawrence's case studies of American policy toward different Third World nations. He chooses five countries that had relatively high priority in the mindsets of American policymakers: Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, and Southern Africa. With these choices, he echoes to some degree the sentiments of Odd Arne Westad and Jeremy Friedman, who have also seen developments in these countries as pivotal to the overall evolution of the Cold War in the Third World.² While there have already been a number of detailed studies of American policy

toward some of these countries, Lawrence's book brings a fresh perspective to the literature by looking at American policy through a comparative framework.

One point that comes across clearly when one looks at Lawrence's new book alongside Friedman's recent *Ripe for Revolution* is that Vietnam was far less critical than American policymakers who were obsessed with it during the 1960s thought it was.³ While, as Lawrence

argues, Vietnam may have shaped U.S. policies toward Brazil and Indonesia, it was the triumph of the right and the demise of the left in these countries that had a more enduring impact on the politics of the Third World.

The End of Ambition draws primarily on American archival materials to make its case. While Lawrence uses a smattering of materials from Brazil, the UK, and Canada, he cites materials from the LBJ Library far more than any other source. This methodology has its strengths and limitations. Lawrence often cannot delve into the thinking of the Johnson administration's counterparts in Brazil or Indonesia in great detail. Yet his accounts of Johnson administration policy toward each of the countries he selects are incredibly thorough and nuanced.

Lawrence clearly benefited from working as the director of the LBJ Library. He combed through the library's collections meticulously and managed to turn up a great deal of material that sheds new light on different aspects of American policy. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a historian who did not have Lawrence's access to and familiarity with the materials in the LBJ Library writing about Johnson's policy quite so definitively.

More than many other recent works on the Cold War in the Third World, Lawrence's book limits itself to a focus on policymaking elites. His work stands in contrast, for instance, to Daniel Immerwahr's *Thinking Small*, which zeroes in on the implementation and unraveling of some very specific aid projects in more local contexts.⁴ Both of these approaches have their merits, but I wonder about the relevance of Lawrence's arguments to the vast economic aid apparatus that the United States had set up around the world by the late 1960s.

Even before the Kennedy administration, United States Operations Missions (USOMs) worked with governments in many newly independent countries to create economic plans and initiate development programs. By the late 1950s, Rostow's ideas about modernization had already become influential among American officials working in Afro-Asian countries. While enthusiasm for development and engagement with Afro-Asian countries might have waned in the highest echelons in Washington during the Johnson administration, it is important to remember that the expansive development bureaucracy that Kennedy had helped to grow did not lose its enthusiasm as quickly as LBJ and his leading advisors did.

One need only peruse the USAID's development experience clearinghouse—an online collection of the agency's documents—to see that American aid programs remained active in many parts of the Third World despite LBJ's shifting priorities.⁵ The White House may have wavered in its ambition to liberal nation building, but thousands of American experts who worked in newly independent countries remained very much committed to it. The notion of an end to American ambition likely applied only to a part of the policy establishment.

This is not to say that what happened at the higher echelons of policymaking did not trickle down to the thousands of Americans who worked on the ground in organizations like the USAID, the Peace Corps, or the United States Information Agency. A more pessimistic attitude in Washington about what could be achieved through development and whether the United States could actually build postcolonial states into liberal democracies unquestionably led to reduced budgets and weaker support for these agencies. Lawrence's approach does not really enable him to fully capture this dynamic. It is still difficult to know how soon and to what degree the shift in policy under Johnson impacted what was actually happening in countries receiving American support. Although the USAID and USIA are mentioned in *The End of Ambition*, they figure as relatively minor players whose concerns and agenda don't shape policy and whose overall impact is unclear.

Lawrence's case studies take us across a diverse array of countries in the Global South that American officials put a great deal of emphasis on, yet I also wonder how what might be called "capitalist Asia" would fit into his narrative. Typically, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan have received little attention in the literature on the Cold War in the Third World, because they sided so strongly with the Free World. Yet Lawrence's study is less about the Cold War rivalries that authors like myself, Westad, and Friedman have focused on and more about the rise and fall of American developmentalist ambition.

It is worth noting that when Rostow wrote of the "big five" countries that received the most American aid—including both military and economic assistance—early in the Kennedy administration, he was referring to South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, Vietnam, and Pakistan.⁶ While Vietnam figures prominently in the book and Pakistan sometimes figures in Lawrence's discussion of India, the other three do not receive significant attention. Of course, Lawrence could not have covered every country, and there are certainly arguments to be made for focusing on countries where the rightward shift in American policy was more evident. Yet given that the rise and fall of American developmentalism is one of the major themes of the book, one wonders why countries that were afforded such a high priority by American officials were left out. It would have been interesting to see how well Lawrence's analysis held up when looking at cases that came to be considered models of liberal developmentalism (even if this was not exactly true) alongside countries where Washington compromised its lofty ideals.

Ultimately, *The End of Ambition* raises as many interesting questions as it answers. That is by no means a bad thing. And even though there are some places where I wish Lawrence could have expanded his analysis, there can be no doubt that he accomplishes a great deal. *The End of Ambition* is unquestionably one of the most important books on the Cold War in the Third World to appear in the last twenty years, and it offers the best overall analysis of American policy in the Global South during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Its impressive research, nuanced analysis, and accessible prose style should make it required reading in both undergraduate and graduate courses on the Cold War.

Notes:

1. See, for instance, Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and Nation Building in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists with Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960–68* (Redwood City, CA, 2010); Nathan J. Citino, *Envisioning the Arab Future: Modernization in U.S.-Arab Relations, 1945–1987* (Cambridge, UK, 2017); Begüm Adalet, *Hotels and Highways: The Construction of Modernization Theory in Cold War Turkey* (Redwood City, CA, 2018).
2. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, UK, 2005); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2015).
3. Jeremy Friedman, *Ripe for Revolution: Building Socialism in the Third World* (Cambridge, MA, 2022).
4. Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).
5. See the USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse: <https://dec.usaid.gov/dec/home/Default.aspx>.
6. Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 3.

Review of Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*

Matthew F. Jacobs

Mark Atwood Lawrence is better acquainted than most scholars with the voluminous literature on the conflicts in Vietnam. And as his prior work demonstrates, he is also well positioned to take a broader view of those conflicts than scholars who focus solely on the American experience there. Since he built his scholarly reputation largely on his ability to render comprehensible the complexities and nuances of conflict in Vietnam, it seems appropriate for him to explore U.S. relations with the rest of the Third World in the shadow of Vietnam in the 1960s. That is precisely what he attempts in *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*, where he steps away from Vietnam and looks at U.S. policymakers.

The structure of the book makes sense, though it requires some intellectual nimbleness from the reader in the early going. In addition to an introduction and conclusion, the book is made up of eight chapters. Chapters 1 and 3 lay the intellectual foundation for the remainder of the book. The first chapter examines "The Liberal Inheritance" of Cold War foreign policymaking and explains the policymaking process during the Kennedy administration.

Here, Lawrence identifies four main strands of thought and their advocates. "Globalists" recognized global political diversity, embraced the desire for change across the Third World, and believed the United States had a critical role to play in bringing about that change. "Nation-builders"—most notably, modernization theorists—recognized the need for transformation and a U.S. role in that process but argued for a single pathway toward its accomplishment.

“Strong-point” thinkers acknowledged the challenges of the world of the 1950s and 1960s but believed focusing on key relationships and alliances offered the best means of navigating the instability that ensued. Finally, “unilateralists” believed the United States could and should act in its own interests at every turn. Lawrence contends that the Kennedy administration contained representatives from each group and that while the president generally welcomed the intellectual give-and-take that frequently emerged, he usually favored the globalists.

The third chapter differentiates Johnson’s approaches to the broader world from Kennedy’s. In Lawrence’s telling, Johnson was more focused on top-down change, elite-generated stability, and transactional relationships that would earn acknowledgment of U.S. efforts in Vietnam. He was thus more inclined to favor strong-point thinking, less likely to engage in debate, and more likely to sideline advisors who did not share his views. Those tendencies were enhanced by Johnson’s greater emphasis on domestic issues, particularly the Great Society, as well as his requirement of personal and political loyalty and his need to demonstrate his power and masculinity, all of which are well documented by other scholars.

Sandwiched between chapters 1 and 3 are brief analyses of five cases—Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, and Southern Africa—during the Kennedy administration. These cases also serve as the individual focal points of chapters 4 through 8. The case studies reflect good geographic distribution, as all the main regions of the Third World are represented. Lawrence acknowledges that he picked countries that the Johnson administration appears to have viewed—or so the evidence suggests—as the most prominent in each region of the world, although some scholars might disagree with his selections.

This position is certainly defensible, but it is also reasonable to ask what might be gained by analyzing at least one or two less prominent cases, so that readers might see how Lawrence’s argument does or does not apply more broadly across the Third World. It does seem an odd choice to insert the Kennedy-era case study overview chapter between the two chapters exploring the intellectual and policymaking foundations of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, as it disrupts the flow between those two chapters as well as the case study analyses. The Kennedy-era case study chapter could have been placed directly before the other case study chapters or could even have been broken up and integrated into each of the relevant case studies themselves.

Nonetheless, the book’s structure serves loosely to connect the Kennedy and Johnson years to the broader contours of U.S. foreign policymaking from the 1950s to the 1970s. The structure therefore helps to build a sense of both continuity within and departure from the broader era of which it is a part. That is indeed one of Lawrence’s points: that a retreat from Kennedy’s bold foreign policymaking in the Third World began in the Johnson administration, rather than emerging from the transition to the realpolitik of the Nixon and Kissinger years. In Lawrence’s interpretation, the Nixon Doctrine was thus less innovation and more continuation of a policy developed out of a mixture of necessity and intellectual predilection.

Overall, there is little to quibble with in the basic telling of the story, and it is a story well worth the telling. An unpacking of the Johnson administration’s approach

to the broader Third World is long overdue, and Lawrence spotlights cases (Indonesia, most notably) that are frequently overlooked in the broader literature on the history of U.S. foreign relations since World War II. Certainly, a specialist who works on Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, or Southern Africa might have a suggestion here or there, but that is to be expected when one undertakes this sort of project.

Lawrence also provides a compelling look at the important and sometimes not-so-subtle differences between key advisors and officials who are often lumped together and portrayed as sharing a well-developed worldview and approach to policymaking. One cannot come away from reading this book and look at Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Robert Komer, Chester Bowles, George Ball, and a variety of other individuals in the same way ever again. Finally, Lawrence’s handling of Vietnam is also deft. While the country goes unmentioned for long stretches of each case study, we are reminded that it is ever present, a constant litmus test against which the Johnson administration was evaluating all relationships.

Along the way, however, Lawrence has made some significant choices that will give some readers pause. For example, he states explicitly that he is most interested in examining the ideas and decisions underpinning U.S. foreign policy and approaches to the Third World and in understanding the impact of U.S. involvement in Vietnam in particular. Thus, he relies heavily on traditional U.S.-based sources, such as materials from the National Archives, presidential libraries, newspapers and other media, and diaries or memoirs of prominent, mostly white and male policymakers.

The result is a book that is unapologetically U.S.-focused and therefore uneven at times. U.S. policymakers were often forced to react to events and individuals they had little control over, and, as a result, sometimes struggled to respond appropriately. We get a meaningful exploration of the policymaking mindsets that governed those reactions, but it feels as if the agency of other actors in defining the limited range of options U.S. officials were faced with is underacknowledged.

The biggest challenge with *The End of Ambition*, however, is in deciding if that really is the meaning of the story Lawrence tells. Did the United States ever really possess the ambition to change the world, and if so, did the trials and tribulations of the 1960s bring about its demise? Lawrence argues that the United States began the 1960s with both a policymaking impulse and a broader popular sense of unbridled optimism that it could facilitate a dramatic global transformation, only to have those hopes dashed by the time the next decade arrived. The culprits were military and political overreach in Vietnam, fiscal and political overreach at home in the form of the Great Society, and a concomitant political and social backlash against the forces for change.

In some ways that argument seems obvious enough. But in other ways it is less clear. For example, as I noted earlier in this review, the focus on U.S. policymakers, U.S. sources, and ultimately U.S. agency is important in analyzing American ambitions but limits our ability to understand how local actors embraced, resisted, or constrained those ambitions. There are two additional avenues through which we might explore the ambiguities surrounding this suggested end of ambition.

Review of Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*

Meredith Oyen

First, Lawrence makes the Kennedy and Johnson administrations seem at once intricately connected to while also separate from broader U.S. policymaking during the Cold War. For example, he suggests that the toll Vietnam exacted was partly responsible for the decline in ambition he sees occurring during the Johnson administration. But what if the energy the Kennedy administration brought to policymaking in the Third was an aberration during the Cold War and Johnson was never really on board with it?"

There is ample evidence in the book to suggest that was the case. Chapter Three on "Lyndon Johnson's World" and LBJ's predilection for strong-point thinkers and transactional relationships focused on the Cold War and Vietnam highlights that point. Moreover, in most of the cases Lawrence examines, the transition away from ambition came quite quickly, usually by 1965 or 1966 at the latest, and was not a drawn-out process that corresponded chronologically with the quagmire in Vietnam. From that perspective, U.S. ambitions in the Third World seem uniquely Kennedyesque, and the 1960s look less like the end of ambition and more like Johnson choosing policymakers and policies that comported with his preferred strong-point transactional approach from the beginning.

Second, Lawrence notes repeatedly throughout the book that Kennedy was more adventurous and willing to promote change abroad, while Johnson felt Kennedy was too timid in pursuing urgently needed change at home. Johnson was comfortable expending political and financial capital domestically that he was largely unwilling to spend internationally outside of Vietnam. But Johnson was chastened by the backlash to his domestic agenda, just as he was by the backlash to his efforts in Vietnam.

The point here is to note that to the extent that there may have been a shared national sense of ambition, it never coalesced around a common set of issues or ideas. The ambition that Kennedy might have articulated or possessed regarding transformation in the Third World was not Johnson's. Similarly, Johnson's and his supporters' ambitions in Vietnam did not remain aligned with the broader public. And as the domestic backlash to the Great Society demonstrated, significant portions of the public did not share Johnson's ambition on that front either.

To be sure, *The End of Ambition* is a compelling read about U.S. engagement with the broader Third World in the shadow of Vietnam. That is a story worth telling in its own right, and Mark Lawrence does it justice. But to the extent that American ambition to transform the Third World existed in the first place, the evidence Lawrence presents suggests it died shortly after Kennedy himself.

One might be able to make a compelling case that the 1960s did indeed witness the end of some sort of American ambition on a large scale, but to do so successfully would require defining and teasing out at least three different and often competing strains of ambition—domestic transformation in the form of the Great Society, fighting the Cold War in places like Vietnam, and promoting broader global transformation. Mark Lawrence has laid a strong foundation here, but more work remains to be done to prove that point conclusively.

Lawrence notes repeatedly throughout the book that Kennedy was more adventurous and willing to promote change abroad, while Johnson felt Kennedy was too timid in pursuing urgently needed change at home. Johnson was comfortable expending political and financial capital domestically that he was largely unwilling to spend internationally outside of Vietnam.

In *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era*, author Mark Atwood Lawrence takes readers on a journey from the lofty aspirations for U.S. influence in the world under President John F. Kennedy to the more constrained and pragmatic goals of the Nixon-Kissinger era. His focus is on the foreign policy decision-making of President Lyndon B. Johnson, as he grappled with what he inherited from Kennedy and struggled against allowing the Vietnam War to consume everything. Lawrence argues that Johnson responded to changes in the Third World in ways that demonstrate a clear transition away from Kennedy's idealism and that he put in place many of the salient features of Nixon's approach to the world.

Lawrence is best known as a historian of the Vietnam War, and although that conflict does not take center stage in this book, its presence is always felt. Lawrence makes his case that over the course of the Johnson years, "the Vietnam War played a crucial role in leading U.S. leaders to abandon their liberal preoccupations in favor of a more cautious approach aimed at ensuring stability" (5). The Vietnam War did not simply consume the budget for international aid. It also undermined confidence in the agenda that helped lead the United States boldly into that nation-building project and fueled criticism against the United States in the Third World.

In *The End of Ambition*, Lawrence examines three core factors that influenced the shift in approach to foreign policy: changing leadership in the foreign policy establishment (both at the presidential level and in terms of the key advisors, appointees, and experts who influenced policy); domestic turmoil in the United States, as Johnson's ambitious domestic agenda and the civil rights movement led to conflict and clashes that broke down the Cold War consensus abroad; and changes within the Third World, as recently decolonized or newly decolonizing countries sought to forge their own paths, get aid from both the United States and the Soviet Union, and engage with the nonaligned movement.

Lawrence makes his case by structuring his book around five Third World "case studies": Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, and Southern Africa. The book begins with three early chapters that do a terrific job of succinctly and engagingly summarizing the attitudes and decisions of the Kennedy administration toward the Third World and the shift to the Johnson administration and what changed because of the sudden change of power. Lawrence notes that Kennedy's administration "conceived no consistent or coherent approach to the Third World generally or to specific challenges that arose on its watch (17)." He describes the administration in broad terms as inspired by grand hopes for democratization and U.S. influence in the Third World and open to nonalignment but filled with differing perspectives that debated courses of action without necessarily alighting on a unified policy prescription. Taking the reader through Kennedy's responses to events in his five chosen case studies in a second chapter, Lawrence concludes that because of all the disagreements among the Kennedy elite, the administration "failed to achieve the coherence or consistent innovation that JFK's rhetoric so

often seemed to promise" (41).

Lawrence then turns to a discussion of how the LBJ administration began to diverge from its predecessor when it took over from the fallen president in November 1963. Despite rhetoric of continuity, significant differences in priorities, personality, and decision-making style ensured that Johnson would make different decisions on almost every front. The international environment in which Johnson made decisions also influenced his relatively low tolerance for bold experiments and led him to create some of the patterns for U.S. interaction with the Third World that would be perpetuated by Nixon.

Each of the next five chapters centers on how Johnson responded to events and challenges he faced in Lawrence's case studies. Together, the five chapters demonstrate an emerging "tolerance for authoritarianism" (108), a concern about the costs of international aid, and Johnson's desire to find support for his Vietnam policy among Third World leaders. Lawrence provides comparisons where necessary. For example, he notes that LBJ proved very tolerant of Brazil's turn away from democratic values but found it easy to criticize the democratic leadership of India when their goals did not align with his own.

The final case study, on Southern Africa, provides some of the starkest examples of the effect of domestic politics in the United States on foreign policy decisions, even as it notes the limitations of the Johnson administration's willingness to boldly challenge the status quo. In these chapters the Vietnam War is like a specter that haunts the Johnson administration: it pops up periodically as a reminder of Johnson's eagerness to obtain support from the Third World for the war efforts, and it is clearly a low hum in the background of any decision on what risks to take or how bold a policy choice should be. That said, I was almost surprised it did not appear even more often. I would have assumed that the financial consequences of the war, increasing domestic opposition to it, and uncertainty over strategy would have entered many more conversations, especially ones that concerned places like Indonesia.

The case studies painstakingly build Lawrence's argument and successfully make the case that the transition under Johnson set up the familiar outlines of the Nixon-era approach to the Third World. What gets left out is interesting, however, in part because of Lawrence's focus on the changes in U.S. decision-making and his heavy emphasis on sources from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas. For all the debates about democratization or authoritarian governments, there is very little discussion of human rights in the countries under study. Evidently, human rights were not a major factor in choices about economic or military aid, or the subject did not come up enough in these documents to make a case for it.

The absence of human rights here raises a question for further research: would a wider view of U.S. diplomacy with these nations in the 1960s—one that included more popular press, a wider range of secondary sources, and a more in-depth set of materials from international sources—reveal that concerns over human rights were presented or debated at various points along the way? Similarly, aside from the discussion of apartheid in the final Southern Africa chapter, there is very little discussion of race. Given the long shadow of both colonialism and race relations in the United States, it is inevitable that many people in government held assumptions about their counterpoints in the Brazilian, Indonesian, Iranian, or Indian governments that were rooted in prejudice or stereotypes. Cultural differences nearly always play a part

in mutual understanding and misunderstanding. Do the limits of the sources, and particularly, limits on sources from these target governments, prevent us from knowing the role that racism or racialized assumptions played in these relationships?

No one book can do everything, of course, and these omissions do not interfere with the clarity of the argument or how effectively Lawrence makes his case. Arguably, answering every such critique about five different geographic sites would require very deep and broad research and a series of monographs rather than a single tome, and those monographs would reflect a very different project. This book is the product of the questions the author asked going into it, and those questions are answered well. They speak more to the limitations of the sources upon which the book was based. And there is value in books with this sort of more limited, U.S.-oriented scope and archival foundation.

One aspect of *The End of Ambition* that makes it important in this historical moment is the model it provides for how to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on the United States and the World without international travel.

One aspect of *The End of Ambition* that makes it important in this historical moment is the model it provides for how to make a meaningful contribution to the literature on the United States and the World without international travel. With a few exceptions, the book is overwhelmingly based on sources from the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes and records available at the LBJ Presidential Library, where Lawrence is the current director. The source base makes for a particular perspective that emphasizes high level interchanges and presidential decision-making, and it is certainly possible that it results in constraints based on what did or did not make it into the briefs that appeared at that level.

But in an era in which traveling across international borders to visit archives has become more taxing, time consuming, and in some cases downright impossible, it is useful to have examples of thoughtful scholarship from domestic—and widely accessible—sources. For an extended time to come, a lot of people won't be able to make the international archival trips that have so defined the field for the last few decades, whether because of their own personal constraints (such as small, unvaccinated children at home, elder care, or personal health risks) or structural dilemmas. (Has anyone tried to access an archive in China recently?) A generation of dissertation writers and tenure-track scholars are being forced to rethink projects begun with high hopes for primary source access. A new book that models interpretation within these limits is helpful for reasons beyond the arguments it makes about what changed in U.S. foreign policy ambitions from the 1960s to the 1970s.

In his conclusion, Lawrence presents the Nixon Doctrine as the culmination of the series of decisions Johnson made about the Third World over the course of his presidency. Rather than being a departure from previous policies, the doctrine was a continuation of the ways in which Johnson, and the war that consumed him, reshaped U.S. foreign policy. Idealized visions of a world transformed by American leadership could not be pursued while the country faced mounting challenges. Instead, priority was placed on "order and stability" (307). That shift marked the end of one era of ambition in U.S. foreign policy, but as is often the case, would give rise to others as new personalities and ideals came into power. *The End of Ambition* is a very readable, thoughtful, and persuasive journey through these shifting tides in the 1960s.

Author's Response

Mark Atwood Lawrence

I am sincerely grateful to Gregg Brazinsky, Matthew Jacobs, and Meredith Oyen for such incisive reviews of *The End of Ambition*. Naturally, I am flattered by their positive assessments, no small thing coming from such distinguished scholars with insightful and elegant books to their credit. Particularly gratifying is the unanimous view that I managed to offer a fresh take on the Vietnam War while simultaneously speaking to larger themes in American history during the 1960s—precisely my aim. But I also appreciate the questions and critiques that the reviewers offer. In this response, I would like to address what strike me as the four most important reservations that they raise about my book.

The first is one that I have anticipated since I conceived of the project and made the decision to rely principally on U.S. sources. Shouldn't a book aiming to explain broad currents of international behavior cast its net more widely by considering sources from countries beyond the United States? Jacobs suggests that my focus on American decision-makers may limit my ability to appreciate the agency of foreign governments and therefore the ways in which U.S. options were limited by choices over which Americans had no control. Oyen wonders whether my reliance on American material limits my ability to detect the salience of particular issues—racial prejudice and concern for human rights, for instance—that generated relatively little explicit discussion among American leaders but might have been more significant than the book allows.

These are undeniably valid concerns, and I am a strong champion (and sometimes practitioner) of multi-national, multi-lingual research aimed at situating the United States within the ebb and flow of international relations. Each of the bilateral relationships that I explore clearly deserves thorough research rooted in international sources and deep familiarity with the cultures and histories of the countries in question. Still, I feel confident about the approach I took in *The End of Ambition*.

For one thing, as the reviewers acknowledge, my focus on American sources accords with my main goal of explaining *American* behavior. While foreign sources can certainly be helpful in elucidating the pressures operating on Washington, only deep reading of American records can provide nuanced insight into the political and bureaucratic forces that I believe most profoundly shaped U.S. behavior during the period I examine. In this contention, I lean toward the views laid out by Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall in their eloquent 2020 essay "Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations."¹

My confidence in my sources springs as well from the sheer richness of U.S. materials, which enables the careful historian not only to reconstruct U.S. policy deliberations but also to appreciate the ways in which decisions made by foreign governments shaped and constrained Washington's options. Indeed, one of the broad trends that I chart in *End of Ambition* is growing alarm among U.S. leaders that the outside world increasingly defied American control. Even with its relatively light sprinkling of foreign sources, the book shows in no uncertain terms the influence wielded by leaders of even relatively weak nations like Iran, Indonesia, and India. Sources from these places are not, then, the only way to appreciate the agency—at least in broad strokes—of the countries with which Washington interacted.

The second reservation, raised especially by Jacobs and Brazinsky, centers on my selection of case studies.

Jacobs notes my decision to focus on U.S. relations with major regional powers and wonders how my argument would have held up if I had examined less "important" nations. This is a surely reasonable point, and I might well have found less distinct patterns of U.S. behavior if I had examined, say, Ethiopia, Burma, or Senegal. Yet one of my points in *End of Ambition* is that American leaders focused their attention on regional powers like Iran and Brazil precisely because they expected those nations, if sufficiently aligned with U.S. priorities, to exert helpful influence throughout their neighborhoods.

Looking at less influential nations might thus have made it more difficult to see the key trends that mattered most over time, though I certainly concede that it would be worthwhile to explore how those smaller nations experienced the strengthening of regional powers and the decline of U.S. aid. I suspect many of those nations

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followed a course roughly similar to the pattern I describe in my chapter on India: growing disappointment with the United States, as Washington showed less tolerance of non-alignment and less generosity in its material assistance.

Brazinsky asks shrewdly about a different cluster of nations that I might have examined: Taiwan, South Korea, and other countries of "capitalist Asia."

It's true that I touch on these countries only tangentially, mostly in the context of exploring how Indonesia's lurch to the right in 1965 helped consolidate a pro-Western order in much of East and Southeast Asia outside of Indochina. Much like Wen-Qing Ngoei in his masterful *Arc of Containment*, I see these "success stories" as part of a regional trend toward pro-Western authoritarianism that has long been overshadowed by American failures in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.² But, as Brazinsky suggests, I am remiss in failing to draw out this point in any detail. Doing so might have provided additional evidence for my basic points about the concentration of U.S. aid on a relatively small number of friendly nations. Doing so might also have shown that Americans were sometimes correct in anticipating that elite-enforced political stability might evolve in the direction of democracy over the long term.

I have a similar reaction to the third reservation raised by the reviewers: Brazinsky's suggestion that my focus on high-level decision-makers may obscure the fact that many lower-level officials remained ambitious about economic development throughout the period I examine. Brazinsky is surely correct, and I would have done well to acknowledge that shifting attitudes at the highest echelons of power did not necessarily mean changed minds throughout the foreign policy bureaucracy. Indeed, it stands to reason that agencies focused on development assistance—USAID and the Peace Corps, for example—would have remained committed to their core purposes and may have been inclined to resist changes at higher levels.

Outstanding studies by scholars such as David Ekbladh, Daniel Immerwahr, and Sara Lorenzini make it clear that the decline of developmental ambitions in the late 1960s and 1970s was hardly a simple or seamless trend.³ The same was surely true in the domestic arena, where the decline of liberal ambitions at the highest levels hardly marked a clear or abrupt end to all efforts to fight poverty, protect civil rights, and safeguard the environment, among other objectives of the Great Society. Innumerable policymakers remained committed to the kinds of projects that had flourished in the early 1960s. Meanwhile, non-governmental and supranational organizations expanded to fill the space abandoned by Washington's most powerful leaders, a point made elegantly by Akira Iriye in his 2004 *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*.⁴

Undoubtedly, the persistence of liberal ambitions throughout the bureaucracy and the intensification of reform-minded activity outside the purview of the federal government help account for the resurgence of liberal activism at higher levels in later years—a point I might have made more forcefully in my conclusion. The Carter administration's preoccupation with human rights as well as the later neoconservative drive for democratization in the Third World surely owed something to liberal currents that continued to swirl, even as leaders at the highest level turned to other priorities in the late sixties and early seventies. I hope my book might help inspire other historians to examine the links between the heyday of liberal ambitions in the early 1960s and later surges of interest in the political and economic progress of the Third World.

The fourth and most pointed reservation about *The End of Ambition* comes from Jacobs, who asks an incisive question that cuts to the core of my argument. Did declining American aspirations really flow, as I contend, from a complex array of factors that included rising anti-Americanism in Third World, social and political change within the United States, and the distractions caused by the war in Vietnam? Perhaps, Jacobs suggests, the U.S. policy shift flowed from a single, much simpler cause: the death of John F. Kennedy.

This possibility rests on a characterization of President Kennedy that I certainly endorse: JFK's nuanced understanding of the Third World and sincere desire to position the United States alongside the forces of sociopolitical change made him something of an anomaly among American presidents. Reasonably enough, Jacobs wonders whether Kennedy's assassination, by itself, assured that U.S. policy would revert to older patterns once the relatively unimaginative Lyndon Johnson entered the Oval Office.

I can easily see why Jacobs would raise this question. I devote a good deal of the book to teasing out differences of outlook between Kennedy and Johnson when it came to foreign policy generally and the Third World specifically. Kennedy's assassination raised the likelihood of changes in American policy, regardless of the shifts in the international or domestic environment. Yet, as I argue in the book, the shift from JFK to LBJ is hardly the sole explanation for the transformation of American policies toward the Third World. President Johnson had neither the inclination nor the ability to jettison his predecessor's policies in abrupt or categorical ways. Rather, it took time for LBJ, responding to increasingly difficult international and political conditions, to reorient American policy, and this shift was not inevitable. To put it another way, changing circumstances played a critical role in pushing LBJ to fall back on his core predilections.

Various factors assured that the transformation of American foreign policy would unfold slowly, if it unfolded at all, despite differences of outlook between the two

presidents. For one thing, Johnson saw powerful incentives to stress continuity with the policies and personnel of his slain predecessor. Just as important, LBJ shared JFK's rhetorical dedication to development and democratization in both the domestic and international arenas. Absent the stresses and strains that buffeted U.S. foreign policy during the later 1960s, LBJ would have been content, I'd speculate, to leave well enough alone and perhaps, if international conditions remained favorable, to reap the political and reputational rewards of extending the Great Society beyond American shores. LBJ, after all, often spoke during the early parts of his presidency about his desire to spread liberal reform abroad, even if he never put significant U.S. resources behind this ambition.

My case studies provide additional evidence that LBJ's relatively conventional Cold War predilections coexisted with an aversion to quick or wholesale changes in American policy. Even in Brazil, where Johnson backed a rightwing coup just five months into the presidency of João Goulart, American officials spoke sincerely at first of their desire for a restoration of democracy in the near term. It took time for the administration to accept the permanence of the new regime. With respect to India, Iran, Southern Africa, and Indonesia, moreover, my chapters show that American policy developed slowly and inconsistently.

None of this is to downplay the importance of presidential outlooks and mindsets. My book shows how the leaders at the top of the decision-making pyramid set the parameters within which the bureaucracy generated policy. Yet *The End of Ambition* also shows that U.S. policy, like the proverbial oil tanker, could change course only slowly and that the person at the wheel had to respect the strength of the crosscurrents, the locations of the most favorable channels, the threats of oncoming traffic, and the advice of crew members. The transformation of U.S. policy toward the Third World from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s came about in this way. It was a messy, complicated process that stemmed from various causes and, as I try to show, carried heavy implications for subsequent eras of America's engagement with the outside world.

Notes:

1. Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 39–55.
 2. Wen-Qing Ngoei, *Arc of Containment: Britain, the United States, and Anticommunism in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 2019).
 3. David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ, 2010); Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); and Sara Lorenzini, *Global Development: A Cold War History* (Princeton, NJ, 2019).
 4. Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley, CA, 2002).
- Ebitis anisit ius aut quias conse peliquae as endaerro beatis autente rem. Itament, con nament.