

**Duiker, William J. U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.**

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Volume 15, Number 2, Fall 1995

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs15\\_02br02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs15_02br02)

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**Publisher(s)**

The University of New Brunswick

**ISSN**

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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**Cite this review**

Jespersen, C. (1995). Review of [Duiker, William J. U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 15(2), 156–158.

Duiker, William J. *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

A book by William Duiker on the United States' involvement in Vietnam should be a welcome addition to the existing literature. Duiker, the author of six other books, including one on Vietnam after 1975, is a former foreign service officer in the US Embassy in Saigon; he is also someone whose language skills allow him to utilize Vietnamese sources. Thus he has the potential to make a major contribution to the field of United States-Vietnamese relations.

In his present work Duiker sets out to explain how United States' containment policy came to be applied to Vietnam. In particular, he seeks to answer some fundamental questions about the reasons for the United States' involvement, the perceptions held by foreign policy makers that affected their thinking, and ultimately why the policy of containment failed in Vietnam. In chronological terms, Duiker focuses his study on the two decades immediately after World War II, ending with the Johnson administration's commitment to send in troops. In that respect, then, he covers the same ground as George McT. Kahin in *Intervention: How America became involved in Vietnam* (1986).

Duiker's work can best be described as a careful and judicious assessment of American foreign policy. Duiker goes to great lengths to explain the various sides to the issues and developments affecting American foreign policy toward Vietnam. He lays out the way in which George Frost Kennan's selective approach to containment became more universally applied and concludes that American uncertainty toward Southeast Asia gave way to a more focused policy in 1950. By the spring, Truman was "firmly committed to aiding the French in Indochina." In fact, he argues that 1950 was the pivotal year: "It was in 1950, not in 1954 or 1961 or 1965, that the United States first stepped into the quagmire of Indochina."

In the chapters on the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, Duiker describes the incremental way Vietnam became part of US containment policy: a little bit here, a little more there. This approach partly creates the impression that the United States was a passive actor internationally, almost as if the country had no other choice when it came to the unfolding of events in Vietnam. He criticizes Kahin for being too harsh on the Truman administration, arguing instead that Truman's commitment to Vietnam "was rooted in the traditional American belief in the universality of democratic ideals, the importance of open markets, and the need to create a world safe for political and cultural self-determination."

Kennedy's main problem was his indecision, which "did not help the situation and probably made it worse." Like Eisenhower, JFK bequeathed a legacy "that was virtually bankrupt." In the section on Johnson, Duiker disagrees with Kahin's analysis. Whereas Kennedy had been beset with doubts, Johnson moved ahead with "few if any of the doubts that had inhibited previous presidents," especially after Robert Kennedy and Roger Hilsman left the administration. But Kahin has argued that it was Johnson who tried to apply the brakes repeatedly, and it was his advisers who kept pushing him to accept a little more each time.

In his conclusion Duiker contends with a number of the prevailing interpretations with the same sense of caution that marks the book. The fashionable idea in some political circles that the military involvement in Vietnam was worth the price paid given the current stability in Asia finds its way into his analysis: "In its ultimate purpose — to buy time for the remainder of the region to stabilize — the United States did achieve its objective by (in John McNaughton's phrase) 'getting bloodied' in Vietnam." But having raised this perspective, Duiker immediately backs away, stating that the real issue is "whether the bloody war in Vietnam, which had so many other regrettable consequences for the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy, was necessary to achieve that purpose."

In tackling the arguments made by Harry Summers and others about how the war should have been prosecuted more aggressively, Duiker brings up the contradiction in their thinking. "Ironically, it would have placed U.S. forces in a defensive posture and exposed them to attack by the enemy." Not only that, but even if the supply of men and materials down the Ho Chi Minh trail could have been effectively interdicted, it is highly likely that the North Vietnamese would have developed other avenues for transporting supplies.

He correctly distinguishes the point at which Vietnam really became a problem for the United States:

when the nation's foreign policy makers could no longer discern critical from non-essential areas. "It is vital to define U.S. interests precisely and to adopt an appropriate strategy to deal successfully with those interests. It is especially important for a Great Power not to exaggerate national security needs or lose a sense of proportion in world affairs." Of course, American foreign policy makers did exactly the opposite, as Walter Lippmann had warned in his critique of Kennan's containment doctrine; they became unable to distinguish points of importance from ones of little consequence. Moreover, as Duiker observes, the key error came when the survival of South Vietnam became tied to the prestige and credibility of the United States.

Because the first seven chapters of the book focus on the events prior to the Kennedy administration, Duiker clearly intends to work on a nuanced, detailed portrait of the years prior to the major commitment of United States armed forces. The problem comes with his lack of perspective on the established works in the field. For example, nowhere does he cite Lloyd Gardner's *Approaching Vietnam*; nor does he mention Bruce Cumings or Michael Schaller, both of whom have written on the dynamics of America's containment policy in Asia. Perhaps most surprising of all, Duiker does not mention or cite Melvyn Leffler's recent examination of the containment doctrine as it was conceptualized and implemented by the Truman administration. This seems particularly surprising given Duiker's concern with containment and how it was applied to Vietnam.

Duiker's book is neither a bold new assessment of the conflict, nor a passionate foray into the historiographical waters. Rather, it is a carefully constructed assessment of US containment policy and its impact on Vietnam. Duiker brings the North Vietnamese into the picture but not to any considerable degree, thus the overall contribution to the existing literature is mixed. In his judiciousness, moreover, Duiker sometimes goes too far in trying to present a balanced analysis of the events. There are times when the book cries out for a definitive, declarative, and argumentative sentence. Still, Duiker's work offers readers a chance to consider the nature of the United States' involvement in Vietnam without the emotional rancor that has plagued the debate for the last thirty years.

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