

**Schwab, Orrin. Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War, 1961-1965. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.**

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Schwab, Orrin. *Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War, 1961-1965*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998.

Orrin Schwab's book, *Defending the Free World: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Vietnam War, 1961-1965*, is another attempt to understand the process that led to the introduction of US ground forces in July 1965. The author's intention is to put Vietnam and US Cold War foreign policy in a "new historical perspective" (Preface). In suggesting that Vietnam has to be seen in the context of the larger US global containment system, Schwab anticipated Michael Lind's recently released *Vietnam the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (1999).

Schwab's analysis is based on his appreciation of the term "technocratic," meaning that US foreign policy sought to manage the international system "through institutions and institutionally grounded belief systems" in ways "consistent with societal and institutional interests" (Preface). For example, he recognizes different ideological systems, such as the Neo-Wilsonian and political realist views of the State Department and the "Clausewitzian" dominated Pentagon and officer corps. Vietnam policy was a "multilevel response to the Cold War," and by utilizing such a basic analytical framework Schwab hopes to add a "historical understanding of the intervention as a systemic process of American internationalism" (Preface).

The analysis of "technocratic" policy development begins by examining Kennedy's approach to the Laotian crisis. Holding that Laos had a "direct link to the expansion of American activities in Vietnam" (p. 4), Schwab suggests that the first Laotian assessments of JFK's new administration represented the technocratic approach because they identified all contingencies, political and military, and "exemplified what all interagency policy statements represent, namely, compromises or syntheses of various institutional interests and perspectives" (p. 5). Indeed, JFK's entire Cold War containment policy was technocratic "because it involved the development and use of 'technologies' for the operation and expansion of American internationalism." It also perfectly suited JFK's Flexible Response doctrine as well. As Schwab astutely points out, "There was an institutional and perhaps psychological need for the technocratic quantification of dangers. There had to be a clear and statistical assessment of losses and benefits received or anticipated." (p. 5)

A great strength of the book is that the author stays focused on the bewildering array of problems facing both JFK and Johnson as presidents of the world's greatest power. Thus, though the JCS suggested massive force, including tactical nuclear weapons, to drive the Pathet Lao out of Laos in 1961, JFK had to incorporate this advice into the myriad of geo-strategic problems he faced. Indeed, Schwab clearly makes the point that JFK and LBJ faced daunting cultural perceptions at the time. To challenge the belief that Vietnam was key to the strategic, political and industrial interests of US publicly, or to question the legitimacy of the Domino Theory, "would have been an inconceivable act." (p. 7) This doctrinaire approach might have changed, suggests the author, if JFK and LBJ had fully grasped the nature of the Sino-Soviet split, but the "changes were all too quick to assimilate." (p. 49)

The author also concludes that the counterinsurgency doctrine (CI), instituted by JFK was technocratic because of the "coordination of programs within and between countries" and "among different bureaucratic departments." Implementation was a major problem. Schwab states that from the point of view of the State Department and that of other civilian agencies, "the U.S. Army's concept abrogated the original definition and strategy" and that in "very substantive ways and despite Kennedy's wishes, the military marginalized the concept of political or socioeconomic warfare." (p. 42) The ongoing disputes with the State Department are well traced throughout the book.

Schwab makes it perfectly clear that the JCS was consistent throughout the period in its advice to the presidents to use massive force. He also clearly outlines that as early as 1961 South Vietnam was under direct and ever-increasing military threat although he does not weave this into any coherent argument. (p. 14) In fact, much more needs to be made of the simple fact that by February 1964, and perhaps earlier, the VC were conducting company and battalion-sized operations. Thus, the military's Clausewitzian approach to the war gained major credibility. It was no longer fighting a political war for the hearts and minds but a conventional battle against recognized military formations that were not content to overrun a few strategic hamlets. Schwab points out that the Kennedy administration recognized early that any social science approach at least needed a blanket of military security for success. (p. 16)

A major theme of the book is the string of misinformation that crept into all decision-making. JFK started the lying with his refusal to tell the public US pilots were engaging in combat in support of ARVN in 1962 and LBJ perpetuated the lies throughout his presidency. Indeed, JFK's hesitation to expose his Vietnam policy for full public scrutiny led the author to address the long-standing debate on what JFK might have done had he not been assassinated in November 1963. Schwab suggests that "Kennedy's resolve to defend Vietnam was not absolute," that he was not "hawkish," and that his first line of defense was a social-scientific and technocratic approach to problem solving.

The technocratic approach continued to shape policy after JFK's death but the military slowly gained the ascendancy (p. 68), and LBJ, although paying lip service to JFK's policy, soon accelerated US entry into the war. Schwab asserts that the Gulf of Tonkin incidents were "probably contrived" (p. 81) but ultimately, he suggests, that it "makes little difference" whether the incidents actually occurred because the US and North Vietnam were "on a collision course in 1964" and some other incident would have "provided the political grounds for expanding the U.S. war effort in Indochina." (p. 105) What is apparent is that institutional momentum had taken over by 1965 and the military began to win LBJ's ear. Significantly, however, Schwab does not disagree with the military's traditional complaint that it was hamstrung in gaining victory (p. 156), but paints a picture of a JCS unwilling to challenge the president directly on the issue. (p. 196)

Schwab's narrative is designed to support his main thesis that intervention propagated through the technocratic approach "went beyond the personality of John F. Kennedy or any other individual. Presidents are not powerless, and their decisions do matter, but their

actions can never be autonomous." (p. 66) Later he reemphasizes the point, declaring that "the premise of the argument in this monograph is that agency does not exist at the level of individuals, or of groups or of institutions for that matter. If it appears so to contemporary or historical observers, it is or was an illusion." (p. 81) One critical example of this was the rise in the value of military estimates to LBJ's decision-making. As the author notes, "As more troops were committed, the technocratic strategy was pulled toward the Clausewitzian orientation of the JCS." (p. 168) Despite the need for a good editing job, this book is thought provoking and sharpens our understanding of a very complicated period in American Cold War containment.

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