FOREIGN AFFAIRS

REVIEW ESSAY

From the Jaws of Retreat

Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the Persistence of American Ambition

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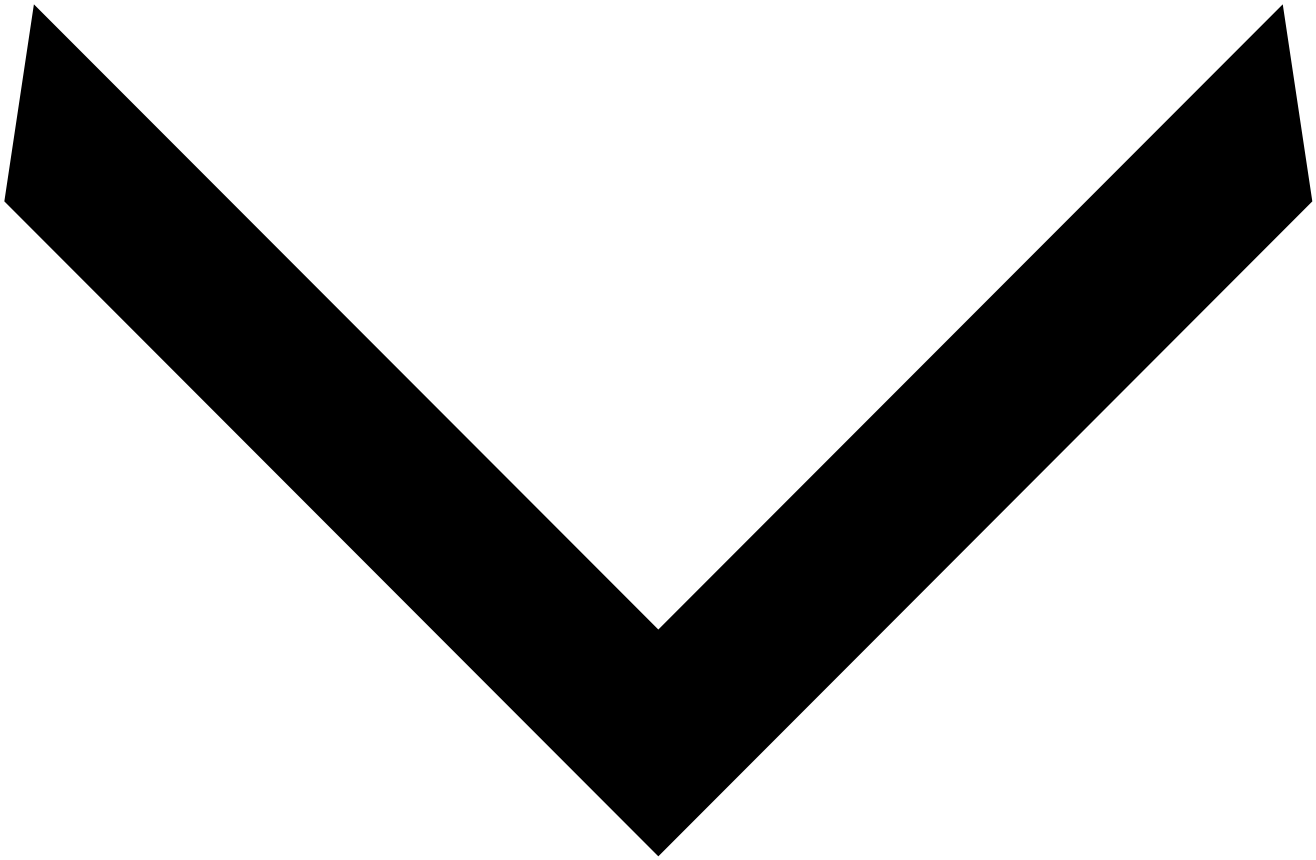
In This Review



The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era
By Mark Atwood Lawrence
Princeton University Press, 2021, 408 pp

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The history of the United States in the postwar era is replete with American efforts to change other nations. These projects often failed to achieve their goals, but few so completely as the recent one in Afghanistan. After 20 years, a great many lives lost, and untold billions spent, the Taliban—the very same group that the United States had intervened to remove at the outset—returned to power while U.S. personnel were still mid-evacuation.

The retreat from Afghanistan follows a pattern in U.S. policy toward the part of the world that in the past was known as the Third World but is now more commonly referred to as the Global South. In the decades since the United States became a global superpower in the 1940s, its approach to that large swath of the world, which encompasses much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, has shifted between two poles. At times, Washington, so it claimed, tried to use its power to make countries in those regions more prosperous and democratic, as it did most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. At other times, U.S. policy eschewed such transformative ambitions. Instead, it prioritized stability, which often meant supporting undemocratic regimes if that served Washington's interests.

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, U.S. policymakers were generally sympathetic toward the aspirations of Third World peoples, as, for example, with the liberation of India and Indonesia from colonial rule. As the Cold War intensified, however, U.S. policy priorities shifted toward the containment of communism. Thus, in the 1950s, Washington was perfectly willing to work with authoritarian governments (such as those in South

Korea and Taiwan) as long as they were dependably anticommunist and to help overthrow democratically elected ones (such as in Iran and Guatemala) if they appeared to be otherwise. In the name of anticommunism, the United States also backed the French war to regain and defend France's colonial rule in Indochina. When the French suffered the decisive defeat at Dien Bien Phu, in 1954, Washington assumed the burden of containing communism in Southeast Asia.

In *The End of Ambition*, the historian Mark Atwood Lawrence argues that the election of the young, charismatic John F. Kennedy as U.S. president brought another brief burst of optimism about the transformative potential of U.S. relations with the Third World. As newly sovereign states rapidly replaced retreating European empires, especially in Africa, the U.S. administration voiced support for the aspirations that Third World peoples expressed for democracy and development. But with Kennedy's assassination and the escalation of the war in Vietnam, Washington's approach started to shift. By the end of the decade, with Richard Nixon in the White House, the United States was again openly prioritizing anticommunism over liberation in the Third World.

Lawrence traces the brief rise and rapid decline of Washington's support for newly independent Third World countries in the 1960s. Although his book begins with Kennedy's election and ends with the rise of the Nixon Doctrine, its core chapters zero in on the presidency of Lyndon Johnson—when, Lawrence argues, the retreat from the ambition of the Kennedy years began.

Lawrence points to the escalation of the American war in Vietnam as a major reason for the dissipation of the high hopes of the Kennedy years. The war kept U.S. policymakers distracted and sullied the United States' image

abroad, making it more difficult for Washington to present itself as an ally to Third World countries. Later, the humiliating defeat in that war would sour the American public on military interventions abroad and bring about, even if only temporarily, a determination to retreat from foreign entanglements.

Yet if the Vietnam War distracted U.S. policymakers from their more high-minded ambitions in the Third World, the focus on that conflict in most histories of U.S. foreign relations has overshadowed the many other ways in which Americans were engaging with the world. Viewing U.S. foreign relations solely through the lens of the White House, the National Security Council, and the State Department—important as these organs are—tends to obscure the global ambitions and impact of other parts of the U.S. government and of other U.S.-based entities that operated abroad, such as philanthropies and nongovernmental organizations. Such actors played important roles in massively ambitious, transformative initiatives that took place in the Third World in that era, including the green revolution in agriculture and the global eradication of smallpox.

Today, media coverage and academic analysis of American foreign policy also tend to concentrate on U.S. military activities and on the high-level debates in Congress and the White House. As with commentary during the Vietnam era and the histories of that time that followed, this focus draws attention away from ambitious work that other parts of the U.S. government and other sectors of American society are carrying out in the Global South—work that may prove, in the long run, to have a greater impact on the U.S. role in the world than the stories in the headlines.

THE RULE OF FOUR

In *The End of Ambition*, Lawrence delves deeply into the perspectives and deliberations of top policymakers in the White House and the State

Department. Following the old Washington adage that "personnel is policy," he carefully tracks who rose and who fell in those agencies across the 1960s and how those changes help explain policy decisions. Officials in the Department of Defense, the military, the CIA, and Congress also make appearances, although less often. Moreover, rather than survey U.S. policy toward the Third World in its entirety, Lawrence concentrates on relations with five countries, selected for their geographic diversity and geopolitical significance: Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, and the white-minority regime in what was then Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe.

Lawrence is especially interested in the outlooks that guided top U.S. decision-makers in forming policy toward the Third World in the 1960s, and he offers a useful taxonomy of four different approaches toward these regions. He calls one group "the globalists." This category included officials such as Chester Bowles and John Kenneth Galbraith, both of whom served as ambassador to India in this period; Adlai Stevenson, who was U.S. ambassador to the UN; and the Kennedy adviser Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. They opposed European imperialism, supported self-determination and the UN, and thought that postcolonial nations should largely be allowed to find their own paths of political and social development. The globalists had Kennedy's ear, but the president worried about the domestic political risks of their approach, which critics saw as too sanguine about the dangers of communism, so he kept them at arm's length. Under Johnson, their influence declined even further. Despite their prominence in elite circles, then, the globalists appear to have had relatively little influence on policy decisions in this era.

The second group were "the nation-builders," most notably represented by Walt Rostow, who served as the director of policy planning in the State Department and later as Johnson's national security adviser. The nation-

builders shared some basic premises with the globalists but were much more worried about communist expansion and did not think newly independent countries could be left to their own devices to stop it. Rather, such states needed firm U.S. guidance delivered through comprehensive aid programs that would steer them onto the right course. Yet time and again, the nation-builders' efforts to cajole or coerce Third World governments to move in a desired direction failed. Instead, postcolonial leaders deftly played the superpowers against each other to preserve their freedom of action.

The third group Lawrence describes are those who adopted what he calls "the 'strongpoint' outlook." These were officials who thought, quite simply, that the Third World did not matter much to U.S. interests; Washington, therefore, should not get too entangled in it. What mattered were U.S. alliances in the industrialized world, primarily with Japan and countries in Western Europe. Lawrence sees Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Undersecretary of State George Ball as leading exponents of this outlook. Despite occupying the commanding heights of the foreign policy establishment throughout much of the 1960s, these officials were continually frustrated in their efforts to keep the United States out of Third World entanglements, most notably in Vietnam. In the end, they, too, could not escape the pervasive hold of anticommunism in U.S. politics in the Cold War era.

Finally, Lawrence describes a fourth group, "the unilateralists," represented primarily by military and intelligence officials. They discounted cooperation with other governments, even core allies. Instead, they preferred the direct application of U.S. power, whether through military action or covert operations. This approach receives less attention than the other three in the book, which focuses more on officials in the White House, the National Security Council, and the State Department than on those in the military or

the CIA. This is not atypical; after all, the latter tend to publish fewer books and make fewer speeches that historians can cite, and their organizations' archives, too, are often far less accessible. Yet arguably, the unilateralists had the greatest impact on U.S. policy in the Third World in this era. It was their outlook, after all, that produced the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and, a few years later, played a major role in escalating the American war in Vietnam.

STUCK WITH CONTAINMENT

In framing his book's argument, Lawrence stresses how Washington's policy in the Third World shifted in the course of the 1960s from the great promise of the Kennedy years to wary disengagement under Nixon. Lawrence emphasizes that the shift began under Johnson, who, compared with Kennedy, was more transactional in his approach to foreign policy and therefore less keen to give U.S. aid to governments, such as India's, that refused to toe Washington's Cold War line.

Yet as the book turns to a detailed account of U.S. policy in its five case studies, these distinctions—between different administrations, between different policy approaches—often seem to be overshadowed by the relentless slog of policymaking amid shifting, complex, and ambiguous circumstances. The picture that ultimately emerges is one in which, despite some changes in tone and personnel as the decade progressed, U.S. policy toward the five countries on which Lawrence focuses did not change as much as one might have expected.

Each case was different, of course, but several common threads emerge. First, throughout the 1960s, disagreements within the foreign policy establishment often fostered ambivalence and hedging. Second, perceptions of domestic political risk led even officials sympathetic to Third World aspirations to tread carefully lest they be tarred with coddling communism.

Finally, and perhaps most important, Third World leaders, jealous of their hard-won sovereignty, resisted U.S. efforts to shape their behavior, whether with carrots or sticks. For example, Lawrence finds that when Washington tried to use increased development aid to draw governments closer to its orbit, the result was often the opposite: postcolonial leaders instead reached out to other powers, often the Soviet Union, in order to balance against U.S. influence and preserve their freedom of action.

To the extent that a consistent through line emerges in Washington's policy toward these places, it can be summed up in one very predictable word: "containment." Nearly every decision on whom to support, how much aid to give, and what public rhetoric to deploy seems to have been calculated to ward off any risk of communist gains, or the appearance of such gains. In fact, the impression one gets from the detailed narrative in this book is that whatever sympathies Kennedy, or Johnson, or some of their advisers may have had for the ambitions of Third World peoples, the political exigencies of containment tightly circumscribed their policy choices.

Herein lies an irony. Lawrence argues that the escalation in Vietnam, and Cold War concerns more generally, made U.S. policymakers less responsive to the aspirations of Third World peoples and that, therefore, there was a "lost opportunity" to forge better relations with those peoples and help them make gains in democracy and development. Yet the story he tells suggests that, judged strictly by the standard of containment, the U.S. position in all five cases improved in the 1960s. Brazil and Indonesia both saw military coups that replaced leftist governments with pro-Western generals. Iran, already leaning toward the United States in the early 1960s, was even more firmly ensconced in its camp at decade's end. India, an avatar of forceful neutralism early on, saw its influence diminished by regional conflict and domestic troubles. And southern Africa, where white-minority rule had

appeared likely to cause a regional conflagration, seemed to have largely stabilized by the end of the decade, at least from Washington's perspective. In short, if the 1960s showed that support for friendly dictators helped Washington contain communism in the Third World, it is hardly surprising that, as Lawrence concludes, the incoming Nixon administration committed even more firmly to that strategy.

Yet if one peers just beyond the chronological scope of this book, it becomes clear that the retrenchment of the Nixon Doctrine turned out to be only temporary. In fact, the zeal to change the Third World soon returned to Washington in the Carter and Reagan years, first in the form of a crusade for human rights and then as a posture of muscular anticommunism that saw the proliferation of U.S. military entanglements across these regions, often justified in the name of promoting American values.

The end of the Cold War ignited even greater ambition in Washington. The Gulf War of 1990–91, which President George H. W. Bush framed as a defense of Kuwaiti self-determination in the face of Iraqi aggression, was followed by U.S. interventions in Somalia, the Balkans, and elsewhere. Then came the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, where Washington's ambition reached another tragic climax as the United States sought to restructure entire societies in the name of prosperity and democracy (and, of course, counterterrorism). Only in the last half decade or so, with the ignominious collapse of these projects, has the United States again turned back toward retrenchment, at least for now.

VARIETIES OF AMBITION

A somewhat different view of the history of U.S. engagement in the Global South emerges if one looks beyond the policymakers in the White House and the exercise of U.S. military power. During the 1960s, Johnson and his

foreign policy mandarins became increasingly entangled in Vietnam and retreated from any expansive liberal ambitions in the Third World in favor of working with friendly dictators. At the same time, however, a substantial number of other Americans, along with a great many others across the world, were deeply engaged in two of the most ambitious and consequential global efforts of the last century.

The first was the green revolution, which introduced into the Global South a range of new agricultural technologies that massively expanded the global food supply and earned the American agronomist Norman Borlaug the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970. The second was the World Health Organization's Smallpox Eradication Program, headed by the American epidemiologist Donald Henderson, which not only rid the world of smallpox, a deadly virus that had afflicted humanity for centuries, but also helped bolster vaccination initiatives across much of the Global South by setting the groundwork for the WHO's Expanded Program on Immunization. The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Communicable Disease Center (now the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) played crucial roles in these efforts, as did foundations, research institutes, and expert networks that were based in the United States or funded with U.S. money, both public and private.

This perspective holds lessons for the current moment. Perhaps, if the pattern of U.S. foreign policy that *The End of Ambition* highlights holds, the debacle in Afghanistan, like the one in Vietnam, will merely signal another act in the familiar drama of intervention, retrenchment, and back again. But as was the case in the mid-twentieth century, this pattern represents only one part of the interactions between the United States and the Global South.

Take the example of global health, which the COVID-19 pandemic has brought starkly to the fore. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States collaborated with the Soviet Union, as well as many other countries, on smallpox eradication even as Washington was waging a brutal war in Southeast Asia. The two superpowers could cooperate in this way even amid strategic conflict because they both had an interest in eradicating smallpox in the Global South (national vaccination programs had earlier eliminated it from the Global North), because their scientists could speak to each other and work together, and because there existed an international organization, the WHO, through which they could coordinate these efforts with each other and with dozens of other countries.

Today, the world is witnessing what some have called a new cold war between the United States and China, even as it is experiencing the deadliest pandemic in a century. So far, Washington and Beijing appear to be focused on finger-pointing and nationalist competition. Still, just like half a century ago, the two great powers today have a shared interest in ending the pandemic, their scientists can speak to each other (and have long been doing so, when permitted), and the WHO, whatever its flaws, still allows the two countries to coordinate their efforts along with those of dozens of other countries. The current pandemic, then, would seem to present an ideal opportunity for the sort of collaboration amid conflict that enabled the eradication of smallpox.

More broadly, if Americans see it as in their interest to promote positive change in the Global South, as they should, this history suggests that the best way to do so is not with unilateral military force or even bilateral aid agreements. Rather, the most successful programs have been broad multinational collaborations and have often incorporated public-private partnerships. Although cooperation with China might be lacking at the

moment, the global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines would represent ambition akin to the eradication of smallpox. Bold multilateral action on climate change could have an impact on the order of the green revolution. After the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington appears to be headed for retrenchment, as it was, at least temporarily, in the aftermath of the war in Vietnam. But as history shows, this does not mean that ambitious global efforts are out of reach.

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