
 Reviewed by John Dumbrell, Durham University (UK)

In this excellent book, Jonathan Colman takes the revisionist case for seeing President Lyndon Johnson’s foreign policy in a generally positive light far further than other writers in the field. Colman builds on prior studies such as those by Thomas Alan Schwartz (*Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam*, 2003), Mitchell Lerner (in various articles and book chapters), Andrew Priest (*Kennedy, Johnson and NATO: Britain, America and the Dynamics of Alliance, 1962–68*, 2006), and Michael Lumbers (*Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years*, 2008). Colman sees Johnson as laying the foundations for détente with the Soviet Union and argues that in the case of China, “the very fact that Washington was at last reaching out to the PRC established a precedent” (p. 132).

Johnson as depicted here is not the inward-looking politician who was obsessed by Capitol Hill deal-making and by domestic reform. Too many writers on Johnson have been excessively influenced by his folksy style into portraying the 36th president as a provincialist “Rufus Cornpone” (the name given him during his vice-presidential years by John F. Kennedy’s aides). Colman ably redresses the balance, presenting Johnson as an able and intelligent leader. Following lines of interpretation developed by David Barrett (*Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisors*, 1993), Colman attacks the view that Johnson was trapped in a narrowly self-reinforcing system of “groupthink,” whether in relation to Vietnam or to foreign policy more generally. Rather, Johnson “established a White House operation that was, on the face of it, a very adequate foundation for the formulation of policy, with little evidence of the sort of internecine conflict that would mar the making of foreign policy in later years” (p. 20). Johnson was hardly a groundbreaking diplomatic and foreign policy thinker. He was not generally inclined “to question the globalist containment policies” (p. 207). However, he did sometimes manage to see beyond the foreign policy tracks inherited from the early Cold War. As examples, Colman quotes Johnson’s understanding of the Bretton Woods monetary system and his personal understanding that one day the United States would have to extend formal diplomatic recognition to China. Johnson was also capable of learning and enhancing his comprehension of issues such as arms control.

Colman is not uncritical in his approach to Johnson’s foreign policy and succeeds in offering a corrective to hostile, Vietnam-dominated accounts. Judgments on controversial policy areas and policy decisions are sound. Thus, we are told, in relation to the Six Day War of 1967: “Instead of receiving a green light from Washington, Israel ignored a red one” (p. 153). Colman’s broadly sympathetic account of Johnson’s foreign policy leadership is strongest in relation to Europe and to policy concerning the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Colman provides excellent chapters on U.S. relations with Britain and France and on U.S. adjudication of disputes in NATO.
Where many studies on U.S. policy toward Latin America in the 1960s see the Alliance for Progress as entirely a feature of the Kennedy years, Colman underscores Johnson’s continuing commitment to development in the region. More controversially, he argues that the 1965 military response to the crisis in the Dominican Republic, though “shrill and exaggerated,” was ultimately “beneficial to the Republic’s development” (p. 182).

_The Foreign Policy of Lyndon B. Johnson_ is a fine piece of politico-historical scholarship. It rests on assiduous and original archival research and is written in a clear and highly intelligent style. The book will prove indispensable to future scholars of the Johnson presidency. I have slight reservations about some of Colman’s more charitable judgments; for example, the treatment of the Dominican Republic invasion. (One major negative consequence for Johnson of the “shrill and exaggerated” action of 1965 in the Caribbean was the defection of Senator J. William Fulbright.) However, the major problem with positive judgments on Johnson and his foreign policy relates to Vietnam. Colman provides some superb coverage of developing policy in East Asia, bringing in dimensions, including the role of allies such as South Korea, that are often overlooked. At times (see p. 3) he seems to flirt with Vietnam War revisionism of the type associated with Mark Moyar in his _Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965_ (2006). (Moyar is actually far from a champion of Johnson whom he sees as failing to take the concerted “hard” action needed to defeat Communism in the region.) However, in general, Colman’s position is that Johnson made bad mistakes in Vietnam, that the inevitability of defeat has been overstated, and that errors in Vietnam should not be allowed to obscure the real achievements of his foreign policy—the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, successes in NATO, and so on. There is an argument to be had here, though my own view is that the disastrously short-sighted Vietnam decisions utterly outweighed any positive achievements elsewhere. By the mid-1960s, Vietnam pretty much was Johnson’s foreign policy.

Provocative as well as controversial, Colman’s book is an extremely valuable addition to the field of Johnson scholarship. It sets the agenda for a new era of discussion of a ferociously complex and almost willfully misunderstood presidency.


Reviewed by Rolf Steininger, University of Innsbruck

On 10 April 1946, British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin sent a note to Prime Minister Clement Attlee in which he gave his view of what the Soviet Union was up to: