

LUKE A. NICHTER

*The Last Brahmin: Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and the Making of the Cold War.*

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020. 544 pages.

Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., is a largely forgotten figure in American political history. Dwarfed by his more famous namesake grandfather who challenged President Wilson over the League of Nations, the younger Lodge receives comparatively short shrift from scholars. In light of his importance in twentieth-century domestic and foreign policy, this neglect is both surprising and unfortunate. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, Lodge served as a US Senator (R-MA), a soldier in North Africa during the Second World War, adviser or ambassador to every postwar president from Harry Truman to Gerald Ford, and candidate for both the vice presidency and the Republican presidential nominations. Lodge's life is befitting of an intellectual biography that is as insightful and exhaustive as his tenure. Unfortunately, Luke A. Nichter's book falls well short of such an oeuvre. A work of more promise than performance, *The Last Brahmin* is too analytically soft and lacks depth in research to recover Lodge's legacy effectively.

Nichter's principal contribution is to provide a chronological narrative of Lodge's political life. Considering the duration of his career, this is no small feat. The book's argument is straightforward: Inspired by the obligations of his family name and the Boston Brahmin commitment to service, Lodge served the American nation with distinction and was an influential and often humble policymaker. Because Lodge did not publish any memoirs and left a relatively scattered archival record, scholars have underestimated his importance and have often wrongfully blamed Lodge for

US policy failures, especially concerning Vietnam. To rectify this, the author dedicates chapters to each of Lodge's major political assignments. Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in the four chapters covering Lodge's ambassadorship in Sài Gòn and especially the extensive assessment and diminished role Nichter justifiably assigns Lodge for the coup that toppled Ngô Đình Diệm in 1963. There is also a much shorter but nonetheless effective chapter on Lodge's role in the Paris Peace Talks.

As a Cold War prism, Lodge holds great promise because diplomats involved in the day-to-day business of foreign policy often reveal different mindsets and display different priorities than higher-ranking officials in the U.S. Department of State or the White House. Therefore, it is a shame that *The Last Brahmin* underwhelms so dramatically. The principal cause is that this is rank hagiography. Throughout, Lodge appears larger than life, morally incorruptible, and loyal to a fault. Nothing highlights this problem more than the selective and uncritical use of outdated sources at the expense of more recent scholarship on the Cold War and the American War in Vietnam. To give one example, in just 351 pages, Nichter cites William J. Miller's glorifying but highly problematic 1967 biography of Lodge well over two hundred times. Despite Miller's personal relationship to Lodge, Nichter rarely if ever questions its conclusions. It is bewildering how a book that so ignores basic historical methodology and contemporary scholarship made its way past the reviewers and editors at Yale University Press.

From an analytical perspective, statements and quotes by Lodge are amplified to aggrandize his role, while decisions deserving of critique are explained away or ignored entirely. The latter includes Lodge's decision as United Nations ambassador to investigate his entire 1,200-person staff for suspected communist sympathies and Lodge's role in the 1954 coup that toppled the Guatemalan government when he chaired the United Nations Security Council.

In terms of Lodge's time in Vietnam, the book jacket claims that this work will force historians to rethink their understanding of American involvement in Vietnam. Unfortunately, this promises a lot more than the book can deliver. At best, Nichter unearthed interesting commentary and conversation snippets that enhance our understanding of day-to-day work

in Sài Gòn and added some illuminating details about the fateful days leading up to the overthrow of President Ngô Đình Diệm. None of this, however, will alter or greatly augment scholars' fundamental analyses of the Vietnam War.

Instead of a book that asks hard analytical questions that illuminate something new about the Cold War, this, in the end, is largely a book of quotations by Lodge and about Lodge. The many vignettes and stories of Lodge's encounters with foreign dignitaries, election campaigns, and role in government collectively add up to an interesting and often entertaining read, but not much more. This is unfortunate because there were real opportunities to explore Lodge's evolving political ideology. One wishes that the author had sought to examine rather than simplistically relay Lodge's shifting ideological views of America's role in the world. Recent scholarship has hinted at Lodge's enormous impact on debates regarding the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO, but this receives little attention here. Similarly, Nichter only casually assesses Lodge's role in reforming core ideals of the Republican Party. He hints at Lodge's progressivism, but he misses the opportunity to turn this into a larger conversation about evolving ideologies or perceptions of a changing world. This neglect is especially disappointing in the light of Nichter's decision to focus so much on the already-familiar stories of Lodge's recruitment of Eisenhower on the Republican ticket in 1952 and his time in Vietnam.

Lodge was indeed a colossal character in American postwar politics. Nichter is to be commended for acknowledging as much and for taking on so challenging a figure. Even so, *The Last Brahmin* is not a biography that comprehensively serves Lodge's memory, nor is it the one that a man of such political cognizance would have recognized as convincingly proper. For the definitive book on Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., we continue to wait.

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