



Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam

By Gareth Porter

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Perils of Dominance is the first completely new interpretation of how and why the United States went to war in Vietnam. It provides an authoritative challenge to the prevailing explanation that U.S. officials adhered blindly to a Cold War doctrine that loss of Vietnam would cause a "domino effect" leading to communist domination of the area. Gareth Porter presents compelling evidence that U.S. policy decisions on Vietnam from 1954 to mid-1965 were shaped by an overwhelming imbalance of military power favoring the United States over the Soviet Union and China. He demonstrates how the slide into war in Vietnam is relevant to understanding why the United States went to war in Iraq, and why such wars are likely as long as U.S. military power is overwhelmingly dominant in the world.

Challenging conventional wisdom about the origins of the war, Porter argues that the main impetus for military intervention in Vietnam came not from presidents Kennedy and Johnson but from high-ranking national security officials in their administrations who were heavily influenced by U.S. dominance over its Cold War foes. Porter argues that presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson were all strongly opposed to sending combat forces to Vietnam, but that both Kennedy and Johnson were strongly pressured by their national security advisers to undertake military intervention. Porter reveals for the first time that Kennedy attempted to open a diplomatic track for peace negotiations with North Vietnam in 1962 but was frustrated by bureaucratic resistance. Significantly revising the historical account of a major turning point, Porter describes how Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara deliberately misled Johnson in the Gulf of Tonkin crisis, effectively taking the decision to bomb North Vietnam out of the president's hands.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Decisive military superiority, not fear of a communist planet, steered the United States into the Southeast Asian debacle, argues Vietnam historian Porter in this provocative but scholarly work. This revisionist premise—which suggests that, in the '60s, the U.S. acted as the world's lone superpower in much the same fashion as it does today—upends traditional thinking on the war's major cause. Porter also contends that successive national security advisors were determined to press these advantages despite the reluctance of their commanders-in-chiefs. These fascinating assessments are intertwined with familiar themes, such as Eisenhower's determination to avoid sending troops to aid France in its last ditch attempt at Dien Bien Phu. Johnson's advisors' use of the domino theory, the belief that the fall of South Vietnam would unleash communism throughout the region, as a political tool to convince the president and the public to press forward with escalation is one of the book's more engrossing arguments. But Porter's belief that Johnson "was never held in thrall by any Cold War doctrine... to save South Vietnam" is curious in light of the above. It also ignores strong influences shaping his subsequent actions in Vietnam: the 1949 "loss of China" to communism and the resulting McCarthyite hysteria. Nevertheless, Porter's intriguing reinterpretation of Vietnam politics is certain to stoke debate among academics.

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Review

"This will be the most important contribution to our understanding of the war in Vietnam since the *Pentagon Papers*. I am not exaggerating or speaking for effect. Porter challenges—by and large successfully—most of the accepted views, especially on the importance of the domino theory, the belief that U.S. policy was driven by a perception of its weakness on the world scene, and the belligerence of Johnson and, to a lesser extent, Kennedy."

From the Inside Flap

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