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Book Review

Barrett, David M. *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisers*.

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993. 279 pages.

Since the conclusion of the Vietnam War, there have been many studies and long debates about how the United States had become so entangled in fighting a war to save South Vietnam. In his book, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisers*, author David M. Barrett attempts and succeeds at answering this question. Barrett also succeeds in dismissing the long-believed notion that President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) isolated himself from criticism of the Vietnam War. In a balanced, yet sympathetic portrayal of Johnson, Barrett makes it very clear that the decisions LBJ made throughout the war were not only rational, but were decisions that were made after listening to endless arguments from his formal advisors, and especially from his informal advisors.

Since the day Lyndon Johnson succeeded to the presidency on November 22, 1963, he listened to his formal and informal advisors to try and find excuses to avoid escalating the war in Vietnam. His reason for delay was because he strongly desired to fulfill the goals of his "Great Society." Johnson believed that his Great Society would help all Americans and make the richest country in the world into the greatest country in the world. However, as President, LBJ felt a sense of obligation to keep South Vietnam from falling to Communist North Vietnam. Johnson believed and Barrett agrees that he had this obligation because the three Presidents that came before him were all committed

to Truman's Containment Doctrine. Furthermore, the threat that South Vietnam faced of falling to Communism was a symbolic test of power for the United States.

In August 1964, after an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, where it was reported to Johnson that North Vietnam had fired shots at a U.S. ship, Johnson quickly asked Congress to give him complete control over every aspect of the Vietnam crisis. Shortly afterwards, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution giving the President the control he desired. Immediately after receiving this power, Johnson fired back at North Vietnam. However, in reality, Johnson did not believe that the shots had come from the North Vietnamese military. He just exploited the situation, being the master manipulator that he was, to increase his control and power at home and abroad.

Barrett contends that before the attack at Pleiku on February 7, 1965, Johnson had the chance to pull troops out. He contends that Johnson should have followed the advice of his dovish advisors and used a cover story to get America out of the war. But after a severe attack by the North Vietnamese at Pleiku, Johnson had no choice but to escalate. If Johnson did not escalate, South Vietnam would have fallen and so would America's reputation. With public opinion on his side and the idea of containment as strong as ever, at the end of July 1965, Johnson began bombing raids along the Ho Chi Minh trail, as well as in the North Vietnamese capital, Hanoi, and their port city, Haiphong. Thus, escalation began. But Barrett makes it clear that the idea to bomb was not unanimous among his advisors. Hubert Humphrey, Adlai Stevenson, and George Ball had all opposed the escalation. Not to mention, senators Richard Russell and J. William Fulbright had advised Johnson against escalation as well. For Johnson, the decision to escalate was not easy and it was one that took him almost a half a year to arrive at.

Clark Clifford, a former aide to President Truman told Johnson that intervention in South Vietnam would be a disaster. In a further attempt to influence Johnson, George Ball reminded him that the French had fought for seven long years to save Indochina from falling and they failed. But McGeorge Bundy countered Ball's argument, claiming that the French loss did not necessarily foreshadow an American loss. But Ball kept insisting to Johnson that if the war were escalated that it would be hard to pull troops out if the U.S. began losing battles. Ball, as well as most of Johnson's advisors believed that pulling out of South Vietnam after escalation would make the U.S. appear to be weak. But perhaps, the strongest argument that influenced Johnson came from Dean Acheson, a member of the ten Wise Men, an informal advisory group to Johnson. Acheson believed that the reason the U.S. was having so much trouble in Vietnam was because Johnson and Kennedy had been too indecisive and had concentrated too much on public opinion. Ultimately, Johnson decided to follow the advice of former president Eisenhower, who told him, "so long as the policies are right, as [Eisenhower] believes they are, too much attention need not be given to [Johnson's critics]. The hawks had manipulated the master manipulator into escalating a war that would turn into a disaster.

By 1967, the disaster of the war was becoming clearer to Americans, as anti-war protests increased and the President's opinion rating steadily dropped. A majority in Congress was becoming increasingly dismayed by the results of the war, but they felt a sense of obligation to support the troops overseas. Johnson was also feeling pressure from General William Westmoreland who kept on asking for more troops, claiming, "success was right around the corner." However, by 1967, none of Johnson's advisors could give him a realistic solution to get out of the war without tarnishing America's

reputation, so he continued the war. For the most part, Johnson kept hearing that he was doing the right thing by continually cooperating with Westmoreland's demands for increasing the number of troops in battle. Although, Robert McNamara, one of the major hawks that convinced LBJ to escalate the war in the first place, made the dovish comment that consistent U.S. bombing increased radical influence in North Vietnam. But as Arthur Schlesinger writes, Johnson along with the Joint Chiefs of Staff pushed "relentlessly to escalate the war."

The following year, on January 30, 1968, the unthinkable happened. The cities of South Vietnam came under attack and American embassies were destroyed. The cities, which were believed to be safe from attacks, had been attacked. This destruction was labeled the Tet Offensive. However, General Westmoreland regrouped and eventually won the battle, driving the North Vietnamese away. But the real damage had already been done. The destruction that had ensued in the long battle was relayed across living rooms in the United States, and behind that picture, were voices that were horrified by the events that had transpired. The media backlash to the war led Johnson to try and seek peace, as he announced on March 31, 1968.

Author and professor David M. Barrett, a political science professor at Villanova University, has drawn his research from numerous sources. He has made excellent use of archival materials from the Lyndon B. Johnson library, the Richard B. Russell library, the Dwight D. Eisenhower library, the Minnesota Historical Society, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress. In addition, he has conducted a few interviews, most notably with one of the lead hawk advisors to LBJ, Dean Rusk. Barrett has also intertwined oral interviews of LBJ into his work.

As a result of Barrett's hard work and the long hours that he has obviously dedicated himself to *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisors*, he has added a profoundly important addition to the scholarship of the Vietnam War. His book is interesting and highly readable and would be enjoyed by any history buff that would like a new interpretation on Vietnam. With the eye of a revisionist, Barrett has assessed the long time argument that Lyndon Johnson's "hawkish" decision-making in Vietnam was the result of being close-minded and solely relying on the advice of hawkish advisors, and he has smashed it.

Barrett has discovered that Johnson was willing to listen to anyone who had an opinion to share with him. In addition to listening to the arguments of many of his hawkish advisors, Johnson discussed his options in Vietnam with a countless number of informal advisors who were not hawks. As Johnson told one confidant, "the flow of unofficial information was greater and in many cases, more effective with [him]." In addition to these public and private advisors, Barrett finds that for the most part, Johnson did listen to public opinion. However, he believes that the problem with Johnson's falling public opinion rating was because the public wanted a quick fix to a tough problem. Johnson felt that it was his duty as President of the U.S. to continue the fight that Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy had fought and to save South Vietnam from falling to Communist North Vietnam.

In 1965, a majority of Americans had supported the escalation of the war in Vietnam. However, the problem existed that it was easier to escalate than to de-escalate the war. De-escalation contends that a country is giving up on a war. Johnson's "domino" theory relates his belief that if the U.S. de-escalated, then the Soviet Union

would believe that America was softening its stance on Communism, which could potentially lead to the spread of Communism all around the world. In an attempt to counter Johnson's argument, Ball claims that a "worse blow [than American credibility, as the defender against Communism] would be that the mightiest power in the world is unable to defeat guerrillas." But regardless of the arguments that Johnson heard, he continued the war, believing that history would have condemned him if he pulled out. Johnson probably believed that if he was as fickle minded as all of the people who turned against the war, the United States would be a weak and powerless country today. Barrett believes that after listening to all arguments for and against escalation, Johnson made his decisions based on rational deliberations and considerations. As Johnson said to Fulbright, he listened to everyone, but in the end, he had to "take the responsibility for deciding the policy."