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Review by **Jessica M. Chapman**, Williams College
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Andrew Preston and Gordon Goldstein provide two very different looks at National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy's role in the decision to escalate America's war in Vietnam. Preston hones in on Bundy's Cold War worldview, inherited largely from his mentor Henry Stimson, and his efforts to concentrate power in the National Security Council, which put him in a critical if not decisive position to shape U.S. policy towards Vietnam during the years in which Washington made the decisions for war. In doing so, Preston challenges what he sees as too great an emphasis on presidential decision-making in extant literature on the war's escalation. Goldstein, on the other hand, working largely from interviews and conversations conducted with Bundy just before the latter's death, writes a sympathetic account of Bundy's involvement in the war's escalation. While certainly not uncritical, Goldstein's conclusions often align with Bundy's, especially in highlighting the paramount responsibility of the commander-in-chief to accept or reject his cabinet's advice and make decisions for war or peace unilaterally. Goldstein's contribution, it seems, is less in explaining why Bundy advocated the policies he did or even the weight those recommendations carried with the president, and more in illuminating how the former national security advisor made sense late-in-life of his involvement in the critical decisions to wage war in Vietnam.

Andrew Preston's *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* builds on recent works by Fredrik Logevall and others who have shattered the myth that America's war in Vietnam was inevitable or "overdetermined" because of the prevailing Cold War political climate of the times. By focusing on McGeorge Bundy and the National Security Council, he seeks to analyze more deeply the process by which the decisions to escalate were made. "At key moments," he writes, "between the spring and summer of 1965, Bundy and the NSC staff moved quickly and effectively to quash dissent and limit the presidents' choice of action to a very narrow one of how and when, rather than whether, the United States should wage war in Vietnam" (7). The importance of Bundy and his NSC staff to this process, in Preston's view, stemmed from institutional changes that the National Security Advisor initiated after Kennedy named him to the post in 1961. According to Preston, "Bundy completely transformed the duties and prerogatives of the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, elevating it to a status virtually, if unofficially, equivalent to that of a cabinet secretary" (7). Preston's attention to the interplay within and among the institutions tasked with advising the president on foreign policy matters, combined with a thoughtful examination of Bundy's worldview, goes a long way towards illuminating the process by which Kennedy and Johnson's advisors made a successful case for escalating the air and ground war in Vietnam. Given what Preston describes as

Bundy's unexamined conviction that the defense of noncommunist South Vietnam was wise and necessary, the implications of his strategic outlook and his influential position within the NSC for Washington's Vietnam policy were profound.

Preston writes, "Bundy was enormously intelligent, but his intelligence was facile rather than imaginative" (25). Throughout Bundy's life people compared him to a computer who preferred to concentrate on process rather than ideas. According to Preston, Bundy's personal worldview as it pertained to foreign relations consisted of three mutually dependent themes: "the indispensability of military power to diplomacy; the futility of appeasement; and a fervent, but sometimes pragmatic, anticommunist outlook" (25-26). The former national security advisor, who was shaped largely by his formative collaboration with Henry Stimson in the early Cold War, focused his opprobrium on anything that reeked of isolationism. He was "no warmonger," but he believed in "the primacy of military power to solve international problems in which America's national security, very broadly defined, was at stake" (30). By the 1960s, he would come to see the preservation of a noncommunist South Vietnamese state as a vital interest.

The ramifications of this conviction for both Kennedy and Johnson's Vietnam policies were magnified as Bundy and his NSC staff outmaneuvered the State Department to become the principal advisory body for foreign affairs. Preston ably demonstrates the process by which Bundy transformed the post of Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, inaugurated under Truman, from an administrative position that rarely participated directly in foreign policymaking into "a mirror image of the State Department, only much smaller." He implemented National Security Action memorandum (NSAM) to replace the more cumbersome Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) to facilitate swift adoption of NSC recommendations. And he split NSC staff up into geographic specialties to create new, innovative policies. "Thus," Preston argues, "the Special Assistant would not only have power due to presidential proximity; he would also be endowed with institutional authority and bureaucratic leverage" (41). The result was to concentrate power in the hands of just a few individuals—Bundy and his staff. Moreover, whereas previous national security advisors had served as coordinators of other peoples' policies, Bundy acted as a direct conduit to the president. He exerted immediate control over the workings of the NSC staff, which devised policy recommendations for the short and long term, and "acted as the final editorial clearinghouse for presidential speeches on foreign policy" (44). Bundy was much better able to mobilize the smaller, more flexible NSC staff than Dean Rusk could the unwieldy State Department, giving him the edge when it came to swaying the president towards particular policy recommendations. The Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961, and the "disorganization and administrative informality that did exist in the Kennedy administration" helped expedite this trend, as Kennedy moved the Special Assistant and his subordinates physically closer to him, from across the street into the White House basement (47). From that point on, "all information essential to the conduct of foreign policy would pass through Bundy and the NSC staff via the Situation Room; conversely, most vital communications originating from Washington and

American officials abroad would need to be cleared by Bundy or a member of his staff” (46).

Following Kennedy’s assassination, Johnson leaned on Bundy even more than Kennedy had. “Johnson,” Preston argues, “vested more trust and authority at the top of the decision-making structure and less responsibility in the lower levels,” a fact which “enhanced Bundy’s influence and simultaneously diminished that of the NSC staff” (49). Even with this enhanced influence, Preston notes that Bundy was respectful of his colleagues and largely agreed with McNamara and Rusk on key policy questions. He claims, though, that “As much as anything else, it was this concentration of power in the hands of Bundy and the NSC staff that would largely determine American policy in Southeast Asia” (53). It is here, in explicating the role Bundy played in restructuring the National Security Council and altering its relationship to the State Department as well as the president, that Preston contributes most significantly to our understanding of how the decisions for war in Vietnam were made. Moreover, he demonstrates how Bundy aggrandized the post of National Security Advisor in ways that future occupants of the position, most notably Henry Kissinger, would exploit.

Once this bureaucratic reconfiguration was complete, enhancing Bundy’s influence over the commander-in-chief, his worldview became increasingly relevant to the policymaking process. Preston claims that Bundy did not play a significant role in formulating U.S. policy towards Vietnam until mid-1963, but by the beginning of Johnson’s presidency it “came to represent perhaps the single most important part of his worldview” (54). He tied the Vietnam question to the larger issue of détente with the Soviet Union, viewing it as a forum where the U.S. could demonstrate that its patience was not inexhaustible without risking nuclear war. Bundy’s conception of détente was predicated on confrontation. “The key,” writes Preston, “was to ease tensions with Moscow while not appearing weak to communists around the world” (71). Bundy, Preston argues, thought it was essential to embrace negotiations with the Soviet Union to deter nuclear proliferation and war while avoiding equivocation elsewhere in order to preserve American credibility. Preston claims that “Bundy’s strategy of asymmetrical détente formed the basis of the Johnson administration’s grand strategy” (73). But the strategy was inherently flawed and would not work. While Bundy hoped that escalating hostilities against Hanoi would facilitate a relaxation of tensions with Moscow, the two goals proved incompatible, and the former precluded the latter. The Vietnam War, then, put pressure on the US-Soviet relationship just as both sides sought to relieve that pressure.

Nonetheless, it was Bundy’s conviction, generally shared by his NSC staff, that “the American commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam was an essential, irrevocable one” (83). This belief led him reluctantly to support a coup against Ngo Dinh Diem when it seemed clear that the southern president was no longer able to hold the line against communism. And as South Vietnam spiraled into political chaos, it inspired him to favor escalated military intervention. Preston claims that Bundy’s views crystallized in the spring of 1964, at which point he decided that, despite the action-reaction phenomenon

that led the communists to escalate their military actions in response to U.S. escalations, “the United States would simply have to pay higher and higher costs” in the form of military involvement. He predicated this recommendation on the belief that “South Vietnam possessed an intrinsic importance worth protecting at almost any cost” (148). Until that point, Preston argues that Bundy was content advising the president, “filtering important information to Lyndon Johnson and enacting presidential wishes.” He had, in the first half of 1964, pressed Johnson to take certain actions towards Vietnam, but followed Johnson’s direction without exception. But after the Tonkin Gulf incidents and resolution, “he had undergone the transition from advisor to advocate” (155). Thenceforth, “Bundy devoted his energies to persuading Johnson to go even further in Vietnam” (153). He would not be dissuaded from his determination to win the war.

Preston notes that the Americanization of the war in spring and summer 1965 came as somewhat of a shock to Bundy, who “had conceived of sustained reprisal as a means to achieve, at a relatively small political and military cost, the sustainability of South Vietnam” (191). Still, he advocated escalatory measures. “Withdrawal” writes Preston, “tantamount to an admission of failure, was simply no longer an option” (192). Yet Bundy was not sure that American troops would be able to succeed where bombing had failed. Thus, he became deeply ambivalent about the war. To Preston, what is surprising “is that Bundy was only ambivalent and had not altered his fundamental view of the Vietnam conflict more drastically” (201). On final analysis, his ambivalence during the critical escalatory period extended only to some of the administration’s tactics, not to its overall strategy or purpose.

Of Bundy’s resignation, Preston writes: “He remained as convinced of America’s mission in Southeast Asia in 1966 as he had been in 1961. If his resignation was submitted as a form of protest against the president’s Vietnam policy—a policy Bundy, as much as anyone else, had shaped over the preceding five years—it was known only to Bundy himself” (234). However, once he was free from his direct ties to Vietnam policy and from his obligations to the president, Preston claims that “Bundy would come to regret his role in escalating and waging the Vietnam War” (237). The Tet Offensive in 1968 “shocked Bundy’s faith in the war” and in the policy he had been instrumental in crafting (238). Bundy then began to scrutinize the dogma that informed his views on Vietnam and the Cold War, which resulted in the collapse of his ideologically based worldview. In turn, this contributed to a fairly late-in-life shift from the right to the left of the political spectrum on many issues. This collapse of his conviction revealed its superficiality; Preston writes, “He had inherited it, but it was not his own” (243). As opposed to Walt Rostow and Robert Komer, who forged their own convictions from whole cloth, Bundy and Michael Forrestal’s ideological commitments were inherited and weak, which “helps explain that although they helped to escalate the war in Vietnam, Bundy and Forrestal came to regret their actions while Rostow and Komer did not” (244). Goldstein essentially picks up where Preston left off on this point by exploring Bundy’s regret over his role in escalating the Vietnam War and detailing the search for meaning and lessons that it inspired.

Preston concludes with the following lamentation: “Bundy’s role in marginalizing internal dissent and shaping escalation was crucial to the escalation of the war. Without his efforts, the war would not have unfolded as it did; indeed, it may not have unfolded at all” (248). Thus he assigns to Bundy much more responsibility for the war than Bundy himself or Gordon Goldstein allow.

Gordon Goldstein’s *Lessons In Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* casts the familiar history of Washington’s gradual march to war in Vietnam during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in a novel light by framing it as a series of lessons avowedly learned by McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor who presided over the escalation. The book is essentially the byproduct of a collaborative memoir project that Goldstein undertook with Bundy, but never finished, as Bundy died suddenly of a heart attack mid-way through the process. Goldstein, however, made good use of the extensive discussions he conducted with Bundy in preparation for the former national security advisor’s retrospective study of the Vietnam War. What emerges is less a contribution to historical scholarship on the Vietnam War itself and more a study in how Bundy came to reckon with his pivotal role in bringing about a costly war that would end in defeat, and in his own fall from grace. Bundy was noted for his genius, and his hubris. His background and personality have long been central foci of historical inquiries into his role in the Vietnam conflict by David Halberstam, Kai Bird, and others. He long defended the decisions that led to war in Vietnam or declined to speak about them. Yet his eleventh hour decision to revisit the path to war in Vietnam, in which he played a crucial role, yielded interesting revelations about how he thought about Vietnam and the Cold War in the early 1960s and about how he came to understand the process by which the United States committed itself to a protracted ground and air war there. Goldstein captures and analyses Bundy’s reflections, a set of primary sources to which he has unique access, to great effect.

Goldstein notes that his is a book *about* Bundy, not *by* Bundy. “I have sought,” he writes, “to convey the essential insights of my collaboration with Bundy while also offering an independent analysis of his role in the highly complex narrative of America’s entanglement in Vietnam (24). Goldstein notes that Bundy seemed “as perplexed by the disaster of Vietnam” as any historian, and that he “often exuded a buoyancy that seemed incongruent with the challenges of producing a probing account of his role in the decisions to Americanize the Vietnam War” (28, 70). Moreover, he claims, “For a man wrestling with the demons of his most consequential encounter with history, Bundy often seemed to be very much at peace” (70). This inner peace, Goldstein ventures, may have been a function of Bundy’s focus on Kennedy and Johnson’s management of the crisis in South Vietnam, which “diluted the intensity of introspection he might have trained on his own role in the war” (64). Even though Bundy’s stated intention for undertaking the joint project with Goldstein was to understand how he got Vietnam so wrong in order to draw lessons from the incident that might help future leaders avoid similar mistakes, his conclusions downplayed the significance of the bureaucracy in making the decisions that

led to war while amplifying that of the executive. Though often critical of Bundy's thought process, Goldstein in the end subscribes to his overarching conclusions about the primacy of presidents and the secondary roles of advisors in making foreign policy.

As Goldstein tells it, Bundy credited Kennedy for taking a strong stand against his advisors' recommendations—including his own—to send combat troops to South Vietnam in 1961 (63-64). Bundy perceived that Kennedy based this no-combat-troop policy on a rejection of the domino theory, coupled with an "inherent pessimism about the American capacity to fight and prevail in a Vietnamese war of counterinsurgency" (67). Goldstein concludes, "In the final analysis, what is most remarkable about Kennedy's November 1961 combat troop decision is that despite the overwhelming pressure imposed on him by his senior advisors, the president's determination never wavered" (68). He further notes that Kennedy's decision prompted the elderly Bundy to conclude that America's role in the Vietnam War could have been averted. Here Goldstein's analysis of what was remarkable about this decision and its implications blurs together with Bundy's to the point that it is not entirely clear whether these are his own conclusions, those of the former national security advisor, or some combination of the two.

In the chapter entitled, "Never Trust the Bureaucracy to Get it Right," Goldstein discusses Bundy's ruminations on the Kennedy administration's decision to support tacitly the coup to overthrow its longtime ally, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. He notes that Bundy did not consider the violent overthrow of Diem and his brother Nhu to be of great significance, and that he did not "seem to hold himself particularly responsible for the coordination and performance of the national security bureaucracy that initiated the coup" (94). According to Goldstein, Bundy was glib in his conclusion that the lead-up to the coup need not be a subject of scrutiny, as it was the function of a simple misunderstanding between Kennedy and Bundy's Vietnam staff specialist, Michael Forrestal. Here Goldstein ventures one of his sharper criticisms of the former national security advisor: "Bundy, the coordinating force in the White House, failed to manage the president's advisors, a failure shared with Kennedy's other most senior aids. Perhaps more important, Kennedy in 1963 also allowed the bureaucracy to elude his firm control" (96). Goldstein goes on to conclude, "The lesson of the Diem coup suggested by the experience of the national security advisor as well as the president was perhaps the same: Never trust the bureaucracy to get it right" (96). Here Goldstein once again appears to fall back on Bundy's interpretation of events and the lessons they hold for the future. As subsequent chapters of this same book imply, though, a study of the lessons of Johnson's Vietnam policy might just as easily read: "Never Trust the President to Get it Right."

In discussing Johnson's early decisions—or non-decisions—on Vietnam, Goldstein concludes, "Politics became the enemy of strategy in 1964. Because winning the presidential election was Johnson's overarching goal, he could not permit the situation in Vietnam to deteriorate to a deeper level of crisis. The impending election further constrained Johnson from either escalating the American commitment or embarking on a strategic withdrawal" (132). He notes that Bundy cast harsh judgment on LBJ for allowing

political ambition to cloud his vision and for putting pressure on his advisors to deliver results in Vietnam without enlarging American involvement in the war (133). However, Goldstein also remarks that Bundy, in his advice to Johnson to maintain at all costs the commitment to a non-communist South Vietnam, conflated “the domino theory as it applied to Southeast Asia and the soft underbelly of Johnson’s bid for victory in November—in a way that would be especially threatening to a president with Johnson’s insecurities” (110). Goldstein offers a fairly harsh critique of Bundy in this chapter, distinguishing his reading of the historical record from Bundy’s with the following claim: “The historical record suggests that as national security advisor he largely acquiesced to...political constraints and was disengaged from the vital task of evaluating limited military and diplomatic choices.” Further, he writes, “Bundy capitulated to what was arguably the triumph of politics over strategy, an outcome he retrospectively blamed on Johnson but perhaps should have also assumed some responsibility for himself” (136).

Goldstein argues persuasively that it was during the process of examining his role in bringing about the shift in strategy that occurred under Johnson in 1965 that Bundy struggled most with the self criticism required to make sense of his own failures of analysis and advice (178). “Bundy,” he writes, “indirectly acknowledged the essential irony of his tenure as national security advisor. In response to the crisis in Vietnam, the administration’s preeminent intellectual demonstrated a fundamental lack of rigor in his analysis of the ends and means of American strategy” (178). According to Goldstein, the historical and retrospective record suggests two reasons for Bundy’s failure to compel the Pentagon to demonstrate the rigor of its recommendations to the president. First, he was fixated on the need for the United States not to be perceived as a global power that failed to make credible commitments—a “paper tiger.” Second, “He was disinclined to challenge the prevailing consensus, particularly if it enjoyed the president’s support.” This tendency, Goldstein argues, was compounded by Bundy’s conviction “that it was better to fight and lose in Vietnam than not to fight at all” (183). He concludes that these convictions led to Bundy’s complicity in Johnson’s open-ended deployment of combat forces to Vietnam, and in his failure to engage seriously with the viability of the attrition strategy, both of which even the former national security advisor finally admitted were major errors.

Goldstein closes his volume with this claim: “Perhaps the most important lesson that we can derive from a great disaster...[is] the indispensable centrality of the commander in chief. As Bundy’s final recollections on Vietnam illuminate, intervention is a presidential choice, not an inevitability” (248). While it is certainly true that interventions result from leaders’ decisions, Bundy’s late-in-life musings about the role he played in Johnson choice to escalate the ground war in Vietnam exaggerate the role of the executive and deemphasize the role of presidential advisors across the board. Approaching the problem this way seems to have enabled Bundy to admit that the advice he gave to both Kennedy and Johnson on Vietnam was deeply flawed, while still assigning the lion’s share of the blame for the war and its costs to Johnson. By arguing that Kennedy would have had the good sense to break with his advisors in order to avoid a major escalation while Johnson

fully intended to escalate regardless of the advice he received, Bundy partially exculpates himself for helping to bring about a tragic war about which he only belatedly admitted he was wrong. While Goldstein claims that Bundy actively sought to avoid the appearance that this was his motivation (149), it seems overwhelmingly likely that it contributed to his focus on Kennedy and Johnson as the true architects of the war, whether consciously or unconsciously. A more critical interrogation of Bundy's conclusions about how responsibility for Vietnam policy should be doled out among Johnson and his advisors, perhaps taking into account some of the institutional developments that Preston discusses, would have strengthened Goldstein's already intriguing book.

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