

# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXI-34

**Seth Offenbach.** *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam.* New York: Routledge, 2019. ISBN: 9780367209544 (hardback, \$155.00).

30 March 2020 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-34>

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

## Contents

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Introduction by Michael Brenes, Yale University .....	2
Review by Addison Jensen, University of California, Santa Barbara .....	5
Review by Sarah Katherine Mergel, Dalton State College.....	9
Review by Gregory L. Schneider, Emporia State University .....	13
Review by Jacqueline E. Whitt, U.S. Army War College.....	16
Response by Seth Offenbach, Bronx Community College.....	19

## INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL BRENES, YALE UNIVERSITY

How much does foreign policy matter in American politics? This question informs Seth Offenbach's new book, *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam*. Offenbach's argument is commanding, yet straightforward. He argues that the Vietnam War was fundamental to the formation and identity of American conservatism; indeed, it was "*the* [emphasis added] central issue" for many conservatives (5). Vietnam represented a 'single issue' that consolidated the Right's vehement anti-Communism, its hatred of the Left (particularly the New Left), and its impetus to protect America's 'traditional' values—however traditionally they defined them—into a single project that sought to roll back both the New Deal state and global communism.

But many historians have studied how conservatives organized (or, how they 'fused') in a collective movement after the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Offenbach is attentive to this vast literature on the history of conservatism. His citations to historians such as Lisa McGirr, Nicole Hemmer, and Sandra Scanlon reveal his debts to a two-decade span of scholarship on the American Right that has transformed our understanding of post-1945 United States history.<sup>2</sup> With respect to the work of these historians, Offenbach's book covers familiar territory. Conservatives' participation in electoral politics—Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign in 1964; Ronald Reagan's in 1980—, the creation of media networks and organizations (such as Young Americans for Freedom, or YAF) that recruited new cadres to the cause, and the rise of an evangelical movement in the 1970s all make in appearance in Offenbach's book. Vietnam proved pivotal to each.

But in (re)exploring the relationship between the American Right and Vietnam, Offenbach also captures the factionalism within the conservative movement: the ways in which the Vietnam War not only organized the Right into a coherent movement, but exposed its glaring contradictions to infighting. In this sense, *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* is not so much about a 'conservative movement' but a conservative coalition—a multitude of actors and ideas that coalesced under the banner of conservatism.<sup>3</sup> In one slim volume, Offenbach covers the internecine conflicts between libertarians (such as Murray Rothbard) who opposed the war and the foreign policy hawks who backed it; conservatives who defended President Lyndon Johnson, the man responsible for the largest expansion of the American welfare state since the 1930s, and his war, and those who did not; the conservative 'intellectuals' such as William F. Buckley and William Rusher who broke with President Richard Nixon on détente and his policies toward China, and the "Archie Bunker' conservatives" who retained steadfast support for the president because of Vietnam. (146)

Offenbach spends much of his book discussing how such divisiveness nearly derailed the possibility of a conservative movement. In Offenbach's telling, when it came to Vietnam, American conservatism was at odds with itself, its anti-statist

<sup>1</sup> George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Nicole R. Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013). See also Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Nation Books, 2009); Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> For similar points, see Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump, Second Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

and anti-Communist wings constantly vying for influence. How then, did the Right become such a dominant force in American politics after 1980? The answer: evangelical Christianity. By the end of Offenbach's book, the schisms within the Right are healed by a cultural conservatism born from Vietnam's demise.<sup>4</sup> Issues such as abortion and prayer in public schools unified opposing elements in the movement and displaced the contentious fights over Vietnam. Foreign policy matters in American politics, Offenbach implies, in ways that do not always matter to foreign policy. Tautologies aside, Offenbach's book seeks to offer a political and intellectual history of conservatism that also challenges what historians know about the interrelationship between domestic politics and U.S. foreign policy.

The four reviewers here take up the question of whether Offenbach succeeds. All have praise for the book. Jacqueline Whitt states that "Offenbach's book fills a clear gap in the historiography of conservatism in the United States," while Addison Jensen applauds Offenbach for his "highly commendable use of primary sources, thorough analysis of grassroots organizations such as YAF and the anti-war right, and his clear and concise writing style." Sarah Katherine Mergel compliments Offenbach's skill in synthesizing the various elements on the Right in a single volume, noting that "*The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* provides a detailed and useful overview of the right's positions on Vietnam." Even Gregory Schneider, the least generous of the four reviewers, believes Offenbach "provides an interesting effort to showcase how conservatism was changed by Vietnam."

The reviewers also offer critiques of the book. Mergel and Schneider believe that Offenbach's strongest chapter is on the anti-war libertarians (Chapter 3), and that his last (Chapter 6), on the connections between evangelical conservatism, the culture wars, and Vietnam, is his weakest. Mergel writes that Offenbach's argument that the "swing toward social conservatism" after the fallout over Vietnam "may minimize too much the effect the rights revolution had on shaping opinions about the role of government." Schneider agrees, and states that Offenbach's claim "that the emergence of the New Right and Religious Right of the 1970s was tied into the failure of Vietnam," while novel, "is not lucidly explained here." Schneider overall finds Offenbach's thesis unconvincing, unequivocally stating that "Vietnam wound up strengthening the Right." Whitt further faults Offenbach for the glaring absence of "[r]ace as an analytical category," and would have preferred that Offenbach address the validity of "conservatives' strategic advice." Would an escalated military campaign, "a more aggressive bombing campaign in the north, and the mining of Haiphong Harbor," have created a Vietnam War that was more amenable to conservatives? (This reader is skeptical).

Like any good book, Offenbach's therefore opens possibilities for new questions, conversations, and research. As a historian of U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics, I look forward to seeing how *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* shapes the scholarship to come.

#### Participants:

**Seth Offenbach** is an Associate Professor in the History Department at Bronx Community College, which is part of the City University of New York. *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* is his first manuscript. He is also the author of "Mourning a Loss: Conservative Support for Ngo Dinh Diem" in *Journal of America-East Asian Relations* (2019) and "Defending Freedom in Vietnam: A Conservative Dilemma" in *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism's Decade of Transformation* edited by Laura Jane Gifford and Daniel K. Williams (2012).

**Michael Breneis** is Associate Director of the Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy and Lecturer in History at Yale University. His first book, *For Might and Right: The Cold War and the Remaking of American Democracy*, is forthcoming

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the legacy of the Vietnam War in shaping domestic politics, see Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

this year from University of Massachusetts Press. He is currently working on a dual biography of Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey.

**Addison Jensen** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her work combines foreign relations with cultural history by examining the intersections between popular culture and foreign policy. Her most recently completed project explores the experiences of Asian American soldiers during the Vietnam War. She is currently working on her dissertation, which will investigate the numerous ways in which the countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies (the Civil Rights movement, the Antiwar movement, the Women's Rights Movement, and various racial and ethnic movements) were received by the men and women serving in Vietnam.

**Sarah Katherine Mergel** is a professor of history at Dalton State College. She wrote *Conservative Intellectuals and Richard Nixon: Rethinking the Rise of the Right* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and co-wrote *History in the Making* (Dahlonga: University of North Georgia Press, 2013), an open education resource for use in American history courses. She is currently researching the role of identity politics in the 1920s.

**Gregory L. Schneider** is a Roe R. Cross Distinguished Professor and Professor of History at Emporia State University. He has written/edited four books on the history of American conservatism.

**Jacqueline E. Whitt** is Associate Professor of Strategy at the United States Army War College and the Editor in Chief of WAR ROOM, the online journal of the US Army War College. She holds a PhD in History from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2008). She is the author of *Bringing God to Men: American Military Chaplains and the Vietnam War*, published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2014 and winner of the Richard W. Leopold Prize from the Organization of American Historians in 2016. She writes and teaches about strategic theory, national security policy, and the social and cultural history of the US military. She is currently working on a book about how narrative structures have shaped American strategy from the Cold War through the Global War on Terror.

REVIEW BY ADDISON JENSEN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

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The Vietnam War is often remembered as one of the most divisive periods in the history of the United States. For the American public, the war highlighted tensions between socioeconomic classes, generations, races, and political parties. By the start of the 1970s, the United States seemed to be fracturing from within, a victim of the various conflicts generated by public debates over the Vietnam War. American conservatives of the era were not immune to these pressures. In fact, as Seth Offenbach illustrates in *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam*, conservatives of the 1960s and 1970s were particularly challenged by the question of how to handle the war in Vietnam.

While the war solidified divisions between the right and left, it also resulted in the fracturing of a once cohesive political movement. Following the 1964 defeat of Republican Party nominee Barry Goldwater in his presidential bid, the conservative movement faltered, hindered mainly by internal disputes between the pro-war right and libertarian conservatives who morally opposed the draft system and the war. Faced with a lack of unity, an unclear ideological foundation, and a ‘malaise’ caused by President Richard Nixon’s Vietnam policies, conservatives struggled to keep the movement alive. In response, the right turned to ‘negative conservatism’—a brand of conservatism best characterized as a reaction against the New Left—and the support of Christian evangelical anti-Communists. However, as Offenbach convincingly argues, the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies were essential to the rebirth of the conservative movement. As Offenbach writes, “the New Right would not have been possible without the period of fracture which occurred within the conservative movement during the Vietnam War years...it took mainstream conservative support for the unpopular war, coupled with libertarian opposition to the war and Christian evangelical support for the war, to truly change the nature of conservatism” (4). By 1973, the conservative movement had undergone a significant evolution. With a new focus on religion and morality, conservatives successfully rebranded themselves as the movement that, by 1980, would be best epitomized by Ronald Reagan.

It is this evolution that Offenbach chronicles over the course of six chapters spread across three sections of the book. The sections are arranged thematically, covering the years from ‘The Long 1964’ to the 1973 signing of the Paris Peace Accords. Beginning with the conservative movement’s initial response to the war in Vietnam, the subsequent two sections focus on the deterioration of the movement caused by internal fissures and the eventual rebirth of the conservative movement as the New Right. Offenbach utilizes a wide array of primary sources, ranging from Senator Barry Goldwater’s political manifesto *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960) and bestselling *Why Not Victory?* (1963) to conservative magazines such as *National Review*, *Human Events*, *New Guard*, and personal interviews conducted with former members of the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) organization, a conservative national youth group perhaps best known for crafting the Sharon Statement, a 1960 conservative manifesto.<sup>5</sup> In addition to providing the perspectives of intellectual leaders such as William F. Buckley and Walter Judd, Offenbach also pays attention to the roles of grassroots followers and members of YAF, who significantly shaped the movement. Each chapter contains extensive endnotes and a comprehensive bibliography—useful tools for graduate students and scholars looking to expand their knowledge on the subject.

Offenbach is perhaps at his best in the initial two sections of the book. In a clear and concise introduction, Offenbach introduces his argument, provides his audience with both a helpful definition of conservatism and a short breakdown of the four sub-groups of the conservative movement (libertarians, capitalists, traditionalists, and ‘muscular anti-Communists’), and concludes with an overview of the chapters. Readers are then introduced to the conservative movement in the earliest years of the Vietnam War. The first chapter of the book covers the ‘Long 1964,’ a period spanning from October 1963 to Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965. Offenbach highlights the right’s uncertainty regarding the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. Conservative leaders of the time understood Communism as a “patient, expansionist, and violent ideology” (27). Consequently, leaders such as Goldwater believed that the key to defeating communism lay in the United States

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (New York: Victor Publishing Co., 1960); Barry Goldwater, *Why Not Victory?* (New York: MacFadden Books, 1963).

demonstrating “a willingness to use violence to push back against any communist expansion, regardless of how small the initial communist action was” (27). This creed would eventually tether the right to the war in Vietnam.

However, in the year leading up to President Lyndon Johnson’s Americanization of the war, the right’s hesitation to involve the United States in Indochina foreshadowed the country’s eventual division over the war. Vietnam, readers may be surprised to discover, was not “a war of the right’s choosing” (15). Drawing on articles published in conservative media outlets such as *National Review*, Offenbach argues that conservative leaders cared deeply about third world countries such as Cuba, Panama, Congo, Zanzibar (in Tanzania), and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). These countries were deemed to be higher priority battlefields than Vietnam. Furthermore, the situation in Vietnam was viewed by conservatives as overly complex and challenging—the right viewed a U.S. victory as uncertain for numerous reasons. In October of 1963, the ousting and brutal murder of President Ngo Dinh Diem had left the situation in South Vietnam unstable and weak. Compounding the right’s skepticism was the conservative belief that Johnson was taking a ‘fiddle faddle’ approach to the conflict that prevented the U.S. military from achieving a decisive victory. This opinion would later be echoed by defenders of the war, who argued that the U.S. might have achieved victory if only it had not been forced to wage the conflict with ‘one hand tied behind its back.’ A rendition of this argument was given academic treatment as the ‘better war’ thesis in Lewis Sorley’s 1999 book, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam*.<sup>6</sup>

At its core, Offenbach argues, the right wing’s stance on Vietnam in the ‘Long 1964’ foreshadowed the paradox it would face in subsequent years—while the movement was hesitant to endorse Americanization of the war, it also could not support a troop withdrawal. Communism had to be defeated at all costs. Building on works such as Andrew Johns’ book, *Vietnam’s Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (2010) and Sandra Scanlon’s *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (2013), Offenbach illustrates how the pressure of the impending 1964 election convinced many conservatives that labeling Johnson as ‘soft on Communism’ would help Goldwater win the election.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, conservatives succeeded only in pressuring Johnson to Americanize the war in Vietnam. The right initially threw its support behind the conflict, advocating for tactics such as increased bombing, more funds, and a variation on the ‘put up or shut up’ attitude (all strategies thoroughly explored in chapter 2). However, as Offenbach persuasively shows in the middle section of the book, the right’s enthusiastic attitude toward the war would soon give way to internal strife and a malaise that would significantly weaken the movement.

By the time Richard Nixon entered the White House in 1968, the conservative movement was already beginning to falter. In the three core chapters of the book, Offenbach turns his attention to the major problems facing conservatism: libertarian anti-war activists, an oppositional identity he calls ‘negative conservatism,’ and the widening gap between conservative leaders and grassroots activists that occurred during the Nixon administration. In these chapters, Offenbach makes his most substantial contribution to the historiography. While previous accounts, such as Scanlon’s *The Pro-War Movement*, focus on the right’s support for the war and the troops, the three central chapters “add the voices of the anti-war right to the mix...[and] explain how intellectual conservatives were dissatisfied with their decision to support the increasingly unpopular war” (4). Particularly fascinating are Offenbach’s chapters on the “Dissent of the Libertarians” and “Negative Conservatism.”

In the first of these, Offenbach focuses on libertarian opposition to the war and the ways in which issues such as the draft system drove a wedge between libertarians and members of the general conservative movement. In the years leading up to 1964, many libertarians had been drawn to the movement by Goldwater’s political philosophies—ones that Offenbach

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010); Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

argues leaned towards libertarianism. Following Goldwater's defeat in the 1964 election and the escalation of the Vietnam War, however, libertarians found themselves increasingly at odds with the conservative movement. The breaking point came in the late 1960s over the military draft. While traditionalists supported the war, and therefore, the draft, libertarians viewed the war and draft as morally wrong. By the end of 1967, many young libertarians had abandoned the conservative movement to join their liberal classmates in anti-war and anti-draft demonstrations. The split was especially evident in YAF, where divisions arose between libertarians and traditional conservatives who advocated for an all-volunteer military but stopped short of opposing the war in Vietnam. By 1969, the libertarians had abandoned YAF to form a new organization, the Society for Individual Liberty (SIL). The conservatives had lost a key faction of their movement.

With its numbers significantly weakened and its members divided over the Vietnam War, leaders of the conservative movement searched for an identity to rally around. They settled on an ideology Offenbach deems 'negative conservatism'—a reactionary political strategy that defined itself in opposition to the New Left. The Goldwater years had seen conservatism put forth a coherent set of political beliefs, ideologies, and ideas for how to reshape American society. But the adoption of 'negative conservatism' signaled the beginning of an ideological malaise that would only worsen during the Nixon administration (a subject covered in Chapter 5 of the book). As Offenbach puts it, "by falling into this negative conservatism, the right allowed the left to dictate the terms of engagement, to control the national discourse, and to offer solutions to problems while conservatives sniped at all the left was doing" (111). Motivated by little more than knee-jerk reactions to the New Left, the conservative movement foundered in the late 1960s until the mid-1970s. Offenbach supports this contention by paying close attention to the right's hostility towards 'liberal biased' media outlets who conservatives claimed under-reported communist killings and accented American ones. Here, the author builds off the work of Nicole Hemmer's book, *Messengers on the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (2016), which follows the deterioration of the relationship between the right-wing media and leftist policies.<sup>8</sup> Offenbach also offers a close examination of the ways in which negative conservatism led to the stagnation and eventual decline of YAF in the 1970s. By the late 1960s, many of the movement's leaders were beginning to express their concern that the movement was suffering from a malaise characterized by a static ideology and a deficit of fresh ideas. While the strategy of opposing the left had kept the right afloat in the years immediately following Goldwater's defeat, by the late 1960s, right-wing support for the war had become a burden. As Offenbach puts it, "conservatives were trying to support a war while opposing the Commander-in-Chief and his strategies; this was a difficult message to sell to the public, especially as the public began to disapprove of the war" (126). The right wing found itself limited in its ability to attract new supporters. Negative conservatism would eventually lead evangelical anti-Communists who opposed the New Left to leave the movement (a subject further explored in Chapter 6). However, in the 1960s, the ideology seemed to be evidence of the right's decline.

As Offenbach sees it, the election of Nixon to the presidency dealt yet another blow to the movement. In 1968, many right-wing leaders were attracted to the conservatism of California Governor Ronald Reagan. However, Nixon's foreign policy expertise, combined with his image as a staunch Cold Warrior, convinced the right wing to back his candidacy. Indeed, in the first year of his presidency, Nixon and the leadership of the right enjoyed a warm relationship fostered by the conservative belief that Nixon would prosecute the war more vigorously than Johnson had. By mid-1970, however, Nixon's foreign policy, including his visit to China, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), and his Vietnamization of the war had significantly soured relations between the president and conservative leadership. As Offenbach writes, "they viewed Nixon's embrace of détente and de-escalation as a reversal of his campaign promises and an abandonment of muscular anti-communist conservatives" (139). Exacerbating the situation was the growing divide between the right's leadership and the grassroots. While conservative leaders channeled their anger towards Nixon, the 'Silent Majority,' fueled by negative conservatism, continued to stand by the President against the New Left. Internal divisions deepened. By 1972, conservatives remained tethered to Nixon only reluctantly. When Nixon signed the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, he effectively severed his last remaining tie to the right's leadership and its commitment to a muscular anticommunism. Foreign policy

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<sup>8</sup> Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers on the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

and anti-Communism would now take a backseat to the social and morality issues that would come to characterize the New Right.

In the final section of the book, which includes one chapter and a conclusion, Offenbach examines how the conservative movement was reborn through an infusion of Christian anti-Communism. As Offenbach points out, the eventual pairing of conservatism with religion was hardly unexpected. The belief that Communism was a godless ideology spurred many Christians to adopt an anti-Communist, pro-war stance. To Christian evangelicals, the Cold War could be framed within the biblical story of the struggle between God (the United States) and Satan (the Soviet Union). Further strengthening the ties between conservative anti-Communists and the mainstream movement was the challenge posed by the cultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. To conservative Christians, the changing social and sexual mores championed by the New Left represented a threat to the United States' position as the leader of the free world. As Offenbach points out, "many traditionalists tied their anti-communism into the belief that the communists were bent on world domination and that only freedom, democracy, and Christianity could stop the communist expansion" (172). The New Left represented a threat to these values. To combat these societal changes, conservative leaders began to shift their focus to waging battles against abortion, busing, drugs, and other social issues. By the mid-1970s, the movement had regained its momentum, expanded its base, and was well on its way to becoming the New Right that would become synonymous with the 1980s and the Reagan coalition.

In *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War*, Offenbach has succeeded in making a substantial contribution to the literature on domestic politics and the Vietnam War. The book is a slim 200 pages, and at times, its brevity comes at the cost of a deeper look into topics that warrant further exploration. For example, in an incisive chapter on "The Problem of Richard Nixon," Offenbach does an excellent job of illustrating the widening gap between conservative leaders and the grassroots on issues such as Nixon's approach to China and the SALT negotiations. However, in a subsection discussing the conservative leadership's reaction to the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, there is little discussion of how the conservative grassroots reconciled their support for Nixon with their opposition to the Left and its anti-war movement. Offenbach indicates that Nixon remained popular among conservative activists even after signing the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. But how did a group of activists who centered their policies around opposing the New Left and its anti-war protests swallow such a bitter pill? In the third section of the book, Offenbach also concedes that a variety of factors (outside of anti-Communist beliefs and support for the Vietnam War) contributed to the alliance between conservatives and Christian evangelicals. These issues have been explored by other historians, as Offenbach points out. However, a brief overview of factors such as the rise of feminism, the sunbelt, and the influence of leaders such as President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan—all of which played a significant role in shaping the future of modern conservatism—might have proven helpful to historians or undergraduates unfamiliar with the subject.

These are small quibbles however, and do not detract from the many merits of Offenbach's book, including his highly commendable use of primary sources, thorough analysis of grassroots organizations such as YAF and the anti-war right, and his clear and concise writing style. In a time when the conservative movement is once again undergoing a significant transformation, Offenbach's book could not be timelier. When future historians respond to Offenbach's call for an analysis of the Trump administration and its effect on the contemporary conservative movement, they will have Offenbach to thank for laying a sturdy foundation that thoroughly explores the transformation of the right during the era of the Vietnam War.



## REVIEW BY SARAH KATHERINE MERGEL, DALTON STATE COLLEGE

President Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and subsequent political developments have pushed researchers to explore the rise of the post-World War II right and its continuing influence on American life. In *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam*, Seth Offenbach seeks to add to this growing body of scholarship by exploring connections between the Vietnam War and the conservative movement. Specifically, he looks at areas untouched by previous scholarship—dissent in the conservative movement related to Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> Reading studies like *Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War, 1954–1975* by Robert P. Tomes one might conclude that the only intellectuals who thought about the war sat on the left side of the political spectrum.<sup>10</sup> Offenbach's work helps to fill a gap regarding the right's intellectual response to the Vietnam War as it outlines various strains of conservative thought about the conflict.

Offenbach makes it clear that his purpose is to build on work done by Sandra Scanlon by focusing on how “the movement fought to stay relevant in the face of rising anti-war sentiment throughout the nation” (5).<sup>11</sup> Additionally, while Scanlon looked almost exclusively at conservative support for the war, Offenbach discusses conservative support for and opposition to the war. Offenbach also pays close attention to the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) for two reasons: (1) the divisions in the YAF mirrored the wider movement, and (2) many former YAF members played a significant role in the emergence of the New Right (7). Overall, *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* explores the philosophy the movement while also asking tough questions about the right's political motivations related to its efforts to reshape American society.

He argues the emergence of the New Right in the 1970s directly resulted from the conservative split over the Vietnam War (3-4). The libertarians' departure from the mainstream movement precipitated by their opposition to the draft made the movement more hospitable to evangelical Christians. As the right divided over the necessity of the Vietnam War and the tactics necessary to fight it, the author highlights the failure of conservative leaders to provide ideological guidance to reframe the conversation on what it meant to be a conservative in the United States. Only when the war ceased to be an issue could or did new ideas emerge, and those ideas focused more on issues of interest to evangelicals, not libertarians.

The study contains three main sections (totaling six chapters) plus an introduction and a conclusion. The author uses a wide array of scholarly literature and primary source material to address the topic, with his interviews with conservatives who were somewhat removed from the leadership circle as the most enlightening evidence. His research suggests a solid understanding of the conservative movement and its role in American society in the years from the end of World War II to

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<sup>9</sup> The increased attention to the right began in the mid-1990s not long after articles by Alan Brinkley and Leo Ribuffo, discussing the lack of scholarship on conservatism, appeared in the *American Historical Review* (April 1994). In the following years, scholars produced studies on conservative ideology and politics. For examples of the early scholarship see, Jerome Himmelstein, *To The Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Godfrey Hodgson, *The World Turned Right Side Up: A History of the Conservative Ascendancy in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> Robert P. Tomes, *Apocalypse Then: American Intellectuals and the Vietnam War, 1954–1975* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

the end of the Vietnam War. Of benefit to the reader, each chapter contains a full listing of notes and sources, which demonstrate the breadth and quality of Offenbach's research.

The introduction, beyond sketching the argument and outlining the contents, provides an overview of the ideological underpinnings of conservatism and explains how conservative intellectuals attempted to fuse those ideas into a singular movement. Libertarians, capitalists, traditionalists, and muscular anti-Communists found common ground in supporting Republican Senator Barry Goldwater in 1964. However, Offenbach makes clear that absent a leader like Goldwater, philosophical divisions could and would spell doom for the right. While the author introduces capitalists as a segment of conservatism, the study looks most closely at views of the libertarians, the traditionalists, and the muscular anti-Communists. Vietnam, and foreign policy more generally, did not elicit much commentary from members of the movement who were focused on how government regulation affected business development.

In the first section, Offenbach tackles the movement's views about the war before and after Americanization. In chapter 1, he addresses developments in the conservative movement prior to President Lyndon Johnson's decision to send American troops to fight in Vietnam. The influence of the muscular anti-Communists pushed the right to embrace a prowar stance as the country approached the presidential election of 1964. By casting Johnson as soft on Communism, the right could portray their nominee, Barry Goldwater, as more willing to fight the Communist menace. The right took this stance despite serious reservations about participating in the Southeast Asian conflict. As Offenbach carefully shows, conservative misgivings came through in conflicting statements about the feasibility of victory, and yet, the right also increased pressure on Johnson to seek a victory (41).

In chapter 2 Offenbach turns to the consequences of Americanization. He explains how much of the movement supported the effort while also becoming increasingly critical of how Johnson and later President Richard Nixon fought the war. He also shows how conservative intellectuals, such as those at *National Review*, "laid the foundation for the belief that the Vietnam War was winnable" despite their previous misgivings (55). During the mid-1960s, movement leaders increasingly believed that the war could unify the grassroots between presidential elections, which in turn would keep the movement relevant. For example, Offenbach investigates how the American Conservative Union seized on Vietnam as part of its effort to lead the conservative movement (59). He also highlights the damage the war caused to the right because it dragged on for so many years. Nixon won conservative support in 1968 because of Vietnam, but his slow resolution of the conflict further exacerbated tensions within the movement.

In the second section, the author looks at the problems the movement faced because of the war. In chapter 3, he explores the libertarian influence on the conservative movement as well as how the growing dissent against the war contributed to a split on the right. Offenbach, in what this reader sees as the strongest chapter of the study, shows how libertarianism applied more effectively to domestic than it did to foreign policy. Largely because of the draft, libertarians increasingly soured on the war and thus had more in common with the anti-war movement than the conservative movement. Traditionalists, seeing support for the war as an all-or-nothing prospect, sought ways to minimize the influence of the anti-draft right, especially in groups like the Young Americans for Freedom. The divide among young conservatives was on full display at the 1969 YAF national convention in St. Louis. Traditionalists within state organizations actively tried to prevent libertarians from attending the convention. The burning of a fake draft card during the proceedings created a "momentary state of frenzy," but more importantly showed how much the war had fractured the conservative movement (98).

Offenbach addresses what he terms as 'negative conservatism' in chapter 4. Conservatives saw in Goldwater's message a true challenge to the role the government played in their lives, but Vietnam arrested the movement's momentum as far as presenting an alternative to the liberal narrative. Instead, conservatives "developed an oppositional identity" contributing to an impression the right was more reactionary than forward thinking (110). For example, through the lens of two of William F. Buckley's books, *Up from Liberalism* (1959) and *The Unmaking of a Mayor* (1966), Offenbach notes the difference between "offering a completely different idea of how society should look" and "reducing his [Buckley's] ideas to a publicity

campaign” (113-114).<sup>12</sup> He also discusses conservative distrust of the media because of its perceived liberal bias—a concern that is to this day frequently raised by the right. As noted previously, the author’s interviews with grassroots activists prove useful in helping scholars to understand the shifts in conservatism in the 1960s and 1970s. Here Offenbach shares the story of Fritz Krieger, a grassroots activist from Ohio, to demonstrate the influence of “negative conservatism” on the right (115-116).

In chapter 5, Offenbach looks at the problems the right had with Nixon when it came to the Vietnam War. In what this reader sees as the weakest chapter of the study, he looks at the decrease in the right’s tenuous support for Nixon because of his handling of the conflict in Southeast Asia. Offenbach does address the relationship of Vietnam to the broader détente policy as far as conservative support or lack thereof. He also raises an illustrative point about how movement leaders struggled in responding to Nixon because average conservative voters supported him (142). However, the right’s relationship to Nixon can only be fully explored by looking at both domestic and foreign policy as well as Watergate. The book’s overall focus on Vietnam eliminates the other factors from the equation at a time when, as Offenbach shows, those other issues had become important to the grassroots (146). If those issues were important to voters, then domestic policy issues in this period could have played as significant a role as the wars did in shifting the trajectory of the right.

In the third section, Offenbach highlights the intersection of conservative and evangelical opposition to Communism, which led to the emergence of the New Right. The author opens chapter 6 with a vignette about the textbook controversy in Charleston, West Virginia in September 1974. Parents revolted against the Kanawha County school district’s attempts to add elements of multiculturalism to the curriculum. Offenbach links parent frustration over diversity to long-held ideas about Communism’s threat to the American way of life. The chapter further explores how a shared loathing of Communism helped evangelical Christians overcome fears of working with a Catholic-led conservative movement. Simultaneously, religion gradually replaced the Vietnam War as a focal point of the conservative movement’s efforts to remain relevant. The departure of the libertarians made the shift feasible since calling on the government to promote family values countered the libertarian ethos regarding personal freedoms. By decade’s end, the willingness of evangelicals and Catholics to work together helped to forge the New Right with its focus on “small government, traditional family values, public displays of Christian religiosity, and a pro-America foreign policy” (161).

In the conclusion, the author looks at the organization of the New Right as well as its role in Ronald Reagan’s 1980 victory. Offenbach notes how “negative conservatism created a vital area of agreement with evangelical anti-communists” which movement leaders subsequently used to build a coalition around traditionalist ideals (189). By the mid-1970s, the nation’s political climate had changed; to stay relevant, the conservative movement “needed those who could promote the values and ideas of a fictional version of yesteryear” (193). The author’s parting suggestion that the “Republican Party is no longer beholden to conservatives, and the conservatives of today no longer espouse the same beliefs of the New Right” raises a host of interesting questions for future scholars (194). While Offenbach sees a shift in the Republican Party, conservatives today appear as committed to the necessity of supporting that fictive past as their predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s. The boogeymen have changed from Communists and leftists to terrorists and immigrants, but the underlying message remains quite similar.

*The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* provides a detailed and useful overview of the right’s positions on Vietnam. Offenbach’s explanation of the right’s concerns about the war highlights the political, not ideological, motivations of the fight against Communism by the mid-1960s. As he said, “pundits used the Vietnam War as a political tool to reprimand Johnson” for not doing enough to contain Communism (40). Offenbach underscores how “the right put Johnson in a corner” while simultaneously showing how the president moved in a direction the right did not actually expect. The right found itself supporting an unwinnable war, which destroyed the bonds between traditionalists, muscular anti-

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<sup>12</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr., *Up from Liberalism* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959); Buckley, *The Unmaking of a Mayor* (New York: Viking Press, 1966).

Communists, and libertarians (47). In the end, Offenbach shows the law of unintended consequences regarding Vietnam; in many ways, the actions of conservatives themselves contributed to their malaise later in the decade.

Furthermore, the study moves beyond the upper echelons of the conservative movement in the 1960s to explore how conservative voters intellectually and politically embraced ideas put forward by the right's guiding forces. The infighting among the YAF, detailed in chapter 3, shows the limitations of fusionism on the ground. Too often, studies on political movements present the big ideas without connecting them to local activism, but here the reader sees both sides. Finally, Offenbach's contribution is strongest where he explores the antiwar perspective among conservatives. He reminds readers that even as ideological groups coalesce, they can have very different approaches to the issues that matter to them as a movement (a challenge, for example, faced by Democrats in the Donald Trump era). Those differences, if not carefully managed, can have a negative impact on their movement.

On the other hand, Offenbach glosses over other potential factors contributing to the emergence of the New Right. He does acknowledge how several issues shaped the conservative movement, but in focusing so much on Vietnam, those factors become less germane. Offenbach makes clear at various points in the book that conservative leaders shifted the movement's focus in order to stay relevant. Vietnam initially served as a means to energize conservatives after Goldwater's defeat, but its duration put strains on the movement. The war, according to Offenbach, forced conservative leaders once again to reassess priorities and reinvigorate the foot soldiers. As they did so, they increasingly linked their opposition to Communism with social issues rather than economic issues. Given the emergence of identity politics, Offenbach maintains that "traditionalism provided a more useful framework" than an economic focus rooted in libertarianism (173).

Offenbach's thesis, suggesting that the swing toward social conservatism would not have emerged without the Vietnam War, may minimize too much the effect the rights revolution had on shaping opinions about the role of the government. Independent of the war, conservative-minded voters (whether they were affiliated with the formal movement or not) expressed dismay about desegregation and abortion—both of which supporters of states' rights saw as federal overreach. Thus, shifting attitudes about fighting Communism in Vietnam pushed the door open for expanding the connection between traditional conservatives and evangelical Christians since both linked Communism to the degradation of American society. However, other factors had already nudged the door open. That said, had the libertarians remained a stronger force in the conservative movement in the early 1970s the New Right's emergence could easily have taken longer, and Offenbach skillfully explores the declining relevance of libertarians in the broader conservative movement. Overall, *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the developments in the conservative movement in the 1960s and 1970s, even if the picture it paints of those developments is incomplete.

REVIEW BY GREGORY L. SCHNEIDER, EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Seth Offenbach's new book joins recent scholarly works on the prowar movement and Vietnam in its depiction of elite conservatism and the Vietnam War.<sup>13</sup> Offenbach contends that many conservatives were drawn to the conservative movement by the War in Vietnam. Viscerally anti-Communist, the conservative movement of the 1960s was pro-war and focused on combatting the antiwar movement in society and in politics. Sandra Scanlon's book, *The Pro-War Movement*, focuses significant attention on the motivations and ideas behind Americans and their support for the Vietnam War.<sup>14</sup> Offenbach digs deeper, focusing on how Vietnam reshaped the conservative movement and paved the way for the Reagan coalition of the 1970s and 1980s.

This is a complex argument to make and it involves recasting the usual reasons for the awakening of the New Right and the Religious Right of the 1970s. Offenbach's argument is that Vietnam split the conservative movement—which he demonstrates—while also reshaping it to be more populist, and religious in nature. The emergence of the populist New Right and the religious Right was an outcome of the “crisis within conservatism” (5) which Offenbach sees as having emerged from the battle on the Right over Vietnam.

Offenbach focuses his lens on “elite conservatives,” the thought leaders, pundits, and politicians on the Right who believed in the main tenets of fusionist conservatism put forward through the pages of *National Review*, *Human Events* and in the political campaign of Barry Goldwater in 1964. Even within this ‘vital center’ conservatism (as I have called it elsewhere), Vietnam did not figure largely within the conservative orbit in the early 1960s.<sup>15</sup> Cuba was of greater importance due to its location ninety miles from Florida. And the civil conflict in the Congo was also of more interest, with conservatives lined up behind the separatist province of Katanga and its mercurial leader Moises Tshombe. Vietnam and southeast Asia in general did not figure prominently in the anti-Communist causes on the Right.

With its focus on elite conservatives and the attitudes of pundits and policymakers, Offenbach's book misses the important story of the grassroots Right and Vietnam. The John Birch Society (JBS), founded in 1958 by candy manufacturer Robert Welch, propagated a message to tens of thousands of Americans during the 1960s that the Vietnam War was simply a Communist sideshow to derail American attention due to the fact that the American government had already been taken over by Communists. No elite conservatives held this view, but it would have been worthwhile to spend some attention on the JBS attitude and the radical Right view in order to compare it with the more mainstream view on the Right concerning Vietnam and the necessity to win the war.

Offenbach calls the elite conservative attitude towards Vietnam part of a “put up or shut up strategy.” He quotes a lengthy ad placed by conservative impresario Marvin Liebman, a founder of Young Americans for Freedom and a long anti-Communist activist which made the conservative argument on Vietnam well. Worried about another Korea and loss of 54,000 Americans, Liebman pled with the president that “if we enter the battle, let's enter to win” (40).

The idea of victory in Vietnam had played a role in the Goldwater presidential campaign. Goldwater had written a book, *Why Not Victory?*, focusing on the Cold War in general, and the Arizona senator had taken the war off the election

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<sup>13</sup> Two recent works which shape the pro-war understanding of Vietnam are: Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), and Andrew Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party and the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement*.

<sup>15</sup> Gregory L. Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

campaign table by voting for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and generally supporting President Lyndon Johnson's policy on the war.<sup>16</sup> The conservative movement crafted its own response to Johnson's policy in 1965, arguing for an expanded war, cutting off North Vietnam from China, mining Haiphong Harbor, and extending the U.S. effort. The American Conservative Union endorsed such a strategy in April 1965 and while groups like Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and William F. Buckley's *National Review* urged a victory strategy in Vietnam, conservatives generally accepted and supported Johnson's policies on the war.

Their main target of opposition was the New Left and the antiwar movement which began to dominate the movement, according to Offenbach. He labels the opposition to the antiwar movement and the New Left, "negative conservatism." Why negative? Offenbach states: "policy took a back seat to opposing liberalism and the New Left. The right developed negative conservatism because it was unable to move beyond the Vietnam War as its central issue" (110). He argues that it was akin to a sports fan who hates the opposition no matter what. It became central to conservative identity to hate the New Left, the antiwar movement, and liberalism.

Offenbach believes the main reason for this hatred and negativity was due to Vietnam. But that was only one part of the equation. The 1960s represented a perfect storm of issues and events for conservatives to oppose. They opposed the civil rights movement, while never endorsing the tactics of segregationists and violence against civil rights protesters. They justifiably opposed the extension of welfare state liberalism and Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty and Great Society for its extension of government power and for its deficit spending. They opposed the counterculture, the sexual revolution, and the drug culture. They opposed the antiwar movement and the New Left because, as *National Review* publisher William Rusher argued, the New Left was "nihilistic" anti-American and lacked standards of rationality and decency. (109-110) Rather than calling this negative, the better term would have been oppositional. Indeed, the roots of the culture wars of our day, and the roots of the divisions in American politics are to be found in the oppositional battle conservatives started to fight in the 1960s. Vietnam, rather than central to the debate, was just another brick in the wall so to speak. Offenbach's subtitle is "the other side of Vietnam." There was an 'other Sixties' too, and opposing the main tenets of what we see as the Sixties was not done out of negativity or reaction but also out of a different view of America.

Offenbach does raise one dispute on the Right which caused momentary pain, and that was the revolt of the libertarians over Vietnam, and the draft. Libertarian influences were deeply engrained in the postwar Right and Goldwater represented some of this thinking in the 1964 campaign. Libertarian novelist Ayn Rand was another important figure, influencing young people who became leaders in the libertarian movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Libertarians split with the elite conservatives on foreign policy; they tended to be heirs to the non-interventionist and anti-imperialist positions of the first half of the twentieth century. They disliked the Cold War national security state. Economist Murray Rothbard was an influential critic of American foreign policy from the libertarian perspective. Along with libertarian activist Leonard Liggio, he sought to establish linkages between the libertarians and the New Left over the war, the selective service system and the drug culture. Editing a journal called *Left/Right* (which Offenbach does not cite), Rothbard attacked the conservatives for their support of the war and pushed for a right/left political alternative. Some of these left/right unions did occur. The University of Kansas head of both Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and YAF was the same person in the late 1960s. YAF National Chairman David Keene got along quite well with radicals at the University of Wisconsin, even with Army Math Research Center bomber (still on the FBI Most Wanted List today), David Fine. Politics made some strange bedfellows in the 1960s.

The growth of radical libertarian influences within groups like Young Americans for Freedom, with Pennsylvania YAF leader Don Ernsberger establishing a libertarian caucus, exploded within conservative ranks at the 1969 St. Louis YAF National Convention where the libertarian caucus attempted to get the members to oppose the draft and to end the war. When someone burned a draft card, a melee broke out and the convention expelled the libertarian members who met at the St. Louis Arch led by former Goldwater speechwriter Karl Hess. The split did not lead to YAF's demise; by expelling radical

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<sup>16</sup> Barry M. Goldwater, *Why Not Victory?*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: MacFadden Books, 1964).

libertarians it further clarified the conservative position on the continuation of anti-Communist conservatism within the movement. The Right continued to support the Vietnam War and the Cold War, and the libertarians built their own institutions and publications outside the conservative movement.

One of the striking departures from conservative historiography in the book is Offenbach's argument that the emergence of the New Right and the Religious Right of the 1970s was tied into the failure in Vietnam. This is a new argument and it is not lucidly explained here. Offenbach argues that abortion and the culture wars metaphor replaced real wars, like Vietnam. "The conservative movement's fracturing continued as many on the right began to identify themselves as defenders of both the Vietnam War and traditional gender and religious values." (173-174) But as the author shows, Christianity, Cold War anti-Communism, and politics had been a consistent viewpoint on the Right since the end of World War II. Far from representing a sharp break with conservatism as an ideological position, the conservative evangelicals could, and did, hold these twin views together: that Communism was atheistic and in opposition to the Bible, and that traditional values were under threat from secularism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The waning of the Vietnam War simply meant that now one series of events (culture wars) had replaced the other. But evangelical Christians consistently were opposed to Communism and continued to argue against it and in favor of a strong American military presence in the world well into the 1980s.

In the end, Offenbach provides an interesting effort to showcase how conservatism was changed by Vietnam. But in the end, the effort falls short. Vietnam wound up strengthening the Right. In the wake of the war and in the atrocities and genocide after Communist victories in Vietnam and Cambodia, conservatives like Ronald Reagan blasted the détente strategy and the Vietnam malaise which were allowing Communist victories. Rather than weakening the movement or its commitment to anti-Communism, Vietnam wound up strengthening it. Reagan would speak of the war as a noble cause, joined by neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz.

The 1960s also strengthened conservatism and split liberalism. The failures of the Great Society, the race riots, the counterculture, the violence associated with the Weathermen and the Black Panther Party, convinced the great majority of Americans to vote for Richard Nixon in 1972. Add to that the social issues like abortion, and a bad economy and foreign policy failures under President Jimmy Carter, and it is quite clear that rather than splitting the movement and contributing to a crisis in conservatism, Vietnam contributed to a crisis in liberal governance which it has yet to overcome.

REVIEW BY JACQUELINE E. WHITT, U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

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Seth Offenbach's *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War: The Other Side of Vietnam* offers a (sometimes maddeningly) concise and focused monograph about the ways in which elite conservative responses to the American War in Vietnam shaped the political right in the United States from Republican Barry Goldwater's campaign for the presidency in 1964 to the rise of the New Right and the election of Republican Party nominee Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. In telling this story, Offenbach focuses on elite and intellectual conservative leaders and national-level politics, only occasionally delving into grassroots conservatism or popular opinion. He argues first that support for a more aggressive approach to the Vietnam War was central to the conservative coalescence around Goldwater's campaign in 1964; then that disagreements over the war in Vietnam fractured the conservative movement as it did other parts of American society, as the libertarian faction of the Party split and as conservative elites struggled to understand President Richard Nixon's foreign policy; and finally that support for the war was critical to the eventual integration of the religious right into the mainstream conservative movement.

In many ways, Offenbach's work reaffirms conventional wisdom about the role of foreign policy in shaping American domestic politics: support for (or opposition against) a leader or policy is often more about partisan politics and power than it is about a coherent ideological position or a consistent vision about American power and the role of the United States in the world. Players in the political game—seeking influence or power, and with multiple concerns—often make pragmatic choices that reveal inconsistencies or outright contradictions within their worldviews, and then rationalize those positions after the fact. This pattern is not a conservative pathology alone, to be sure, although conservatives are the primary subject here.

Offenbach's careful analysis of the conservative critiques of President Lyndon Johnson's strategy for Vietnam is instructive here. In the early 1960s, a robust commitment to anti-Communism united conservatives of all stripes, but many conservatives were concerned by the concentration of American effort in Vietnam. Many of them argued forcefully that Latin America and Africa offered better opportunities to fight (and win) the Cold War contest. Especially after the assassination of South Vietnam's leader Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963, conservatives feared that Vietnam might not be "the best place in which to risk U.S. credibility" (34). They believed Diem offered the best hope for American victory in Vietnam and that his death dealt a reputational blow to the United States with regard to its other allies. Johnson's conservative critics also accused Johnson of not fighting the war aggressively enough—of not wanting to win, or being unwilling to win.

But the conservatives offered little in the way of specifics, and their recommendations "looked more like a middle course of action: an increase in U.S. aid to South Vietnam, more bombing of military targets throughout Indochina, and a stronger effort to push America's Asian allies to send in their own troops" (41). Conservatives' ambivalence about the war in Vietnam was especially revealed in how they approached the draft. Goldwater advocated ending the draft in his 1964 campaign, and the draft was a major point of dissent for libertarian-leaning conservatives who believed that the power of the state should be limited. Conservative support for the draft came primarily in response to the left's opposition to it, a clear example of "negative conservatism." As the nation fractured over Vietnam, the conservative movement struggled to offer a positive vision for either the country's domestic or foreign policy.

Offenbach does not fully address whether conservatives' strategic advice—including sealing the border to cut off supplies, conducting a more aggressive bombing campaign in the north, and the mining of Haiphong Harbor—might have made a difference in the outcome of the war, or in reshaping the conservative political movement at home. Indeed, Offenbach makes an implicit argument that regardless of what was actually happening in Vietnam, tactically, operationally, or strategically, the conservative elite would have interpreted it through their particular political position—managing a fractured and out-of-power political movement and trying to gain traction wherever they could. The same issue (Vietnam) that united the movement in 1964-1965, divided it after 1968. Throughout, conservative leaders tried to use the war in Vietnam to position themselves more favorably within the domestic political arena.



They would have attacked Lyndon Johnson for either action or inaction in Vietnam. They rallied pro-war support in opposition to the anti-war protests and the counterculture of the New Left. They supported Richard Nixon reluctantly, out of a pragmatic sense that he shared their values on fighting the Cold War aggressively, but they were often disappointed with his policies and strategy in practice. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, then, conservative disagreements over the war in Vietnam further fractured the movement, which contributed to its ‘malaise’ that lasted through the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency. At the same time, support for the war bound together the evangelical anti-Communist right with traditionalist conservatives, cementing groups that would become the center of the New Right coalition in the 1980s.

Frustratingly, though (especially for military and diplomatic historians), this argument means that the war itself sometimes fades from view. While Offenbach mentions briefly some of the major events of the war, such as Operation Rolling Thunder, the Tet Offensive, and Nixon’s policy of Vietnamization, other details about the war’s changing tactics, operations, and strategy and its relationship to the broader strategy of the Cold War are somewhat thin. Offenbach asserts that conservatives were disillusioned with both Johnson and Nixon’s approaches to the war and that to the end, the conservative elites wanted to ‘win’ in Vietnam, even as other factions within the party, and conservative grassroots voters, grew more and more opposed to the war. But how this ‘winning’ might occur was dependent on the political, strategic, and military situation in Vietnam, and these links are unclear.

A central question, then, goes largely unexamined: did what happened in Vietnam actually matter, or was the war simply a backdrop for a larger political story about the fracturing and reforming of conservatism in the United States? Did it matter how the war ended, or simply that it ended? Offenbach places Vietnam at the center of the political narrative, but its contribution is primarily negative—the cause of fracture and malaise rather than unity. Ultimately, it was not the Vietnam War (or its end), but rather a host of social issues, including abortion, that united the new conservative movement. What, then, is the legacy of the Vietnam War for American conservatism? Here, conservative explanations for the loss, which developed during the war, are important because they established a clear rhetorical frame for understanding military and foreign policy failures in the late twentieth and twenty-first century that revolved around the American media and popular and political *will* rather than strategic or operational or tactical military failure.

As Offenbach traces the fracturing of the political right and its eventual reemergence with the Vietnam War at the center of the story, we see the contours of the historiographical debate that has raged (and continues to rage) over the Vietnam War: was the war ‘winnable’? If so, at what cost? If not, why not? This question matters not only in academic circles, but also in national security and political circles. The specter of the U.S. loss in Vietnam still haunts American domestic politics, civil-military relations, and military strategy and decision making.

The ways in which conservatives portrayed the media, college students, anti-war protestors, liberal politicians, civil-rights activists, feminists, and LGBTQ activists as undermining the American military effort in Vietnam had far-reaching effects on domestic politics and on how Americans talk about war. ‘Supporting the troops’ would not have become a bipartisan mandate without the fissure over Vietnam. A doubling down on the idea of ‘objective civilian control’ of the military, in which political leaders leave ‘military’ decisions and the details of warfighting to the generals, would not have happened without the crisis of Vietnam and the accusation that the war was lost by meddling politicians in Washington.

Similarly, the legacy of Vietnam is critical to understanding foreign policy decision making in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 and in the resurgence of the neoconservatives in the early 2000s. We cannot understand the domestic political response to U.S. military actions in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen or a host of other places without understanding how responses to Vietnam shaped the domestic political environment in the 1960s and 1970s. While Offenbach makes clear that the conservative movement of the 1980s was not the conservative movement of the 2010s, with the Tea Party and the election of President Donald Trump, the effects of foreign policy, and the fracturing of political movements over them, may be instructive in analyzing this period as well.

Offenbach's book fills a clear gap in the historiography of conservatism in the United States by linking—but not overselling—the connection between foreign policy and domestic politics.<sup>17</sup> This relatively narrow focus, however, leaves the monograph with some odd silences. Race as an analytical category is, for the most part, absent from the book. This absence is problematic because race is central to understanding not only political responses to the Vietnam War, but also to understanding the contours of domestic politics from the 1960s through the 1980s as well as the relationship between (white) evangelicalism and conservative politics. The closest the book comes to recognizing the centrality of race to these issues is a brief discussion of 'Archie Bunker' issues (named after the television character) that divided conservative grassroots voters and the conservative elite (146). Offenbach's discussion of evangelical anti-Communism should be qualified more precisely as a discussion of white evangelical anti-Communism. The connections between grassroots conservatives, Nixon's 'silent majority,' white evangelicals, the Republican Party's 'southern strategy,' civil rights, the Cold War, and Vietnam deserve more thorough explication.

Readers might also expect a more thorough analysis of major religious groups' official commentary on and support for the war. How did the Southern Baptist Convention, for example, articulate its position on the Vietnam War? Analysis of the major conservative, evangelical denominations' responses to the war might have offered Offenbach one way to link elite intellectual opinion with grassroots opinion. The split between mainline and white evangelical denominations over the Vietnam War marked an important moment in the history of American religion and the history of American politics. The unwavering support of these conservative evangelical denominations has also continued to shape the military chaplaincy and the religious environment of the U.S. military into the twenty-first century, yet these forces are largely absent from Offenbach's book.

Still, the virtues of the book's focus and concision are important. And the areas outlined above, which could have been covered in more detail, are areas where the literature is rich. Offenbach offers a careful intervention into the historiography of American conservatism, and secondarily, of the American War in Vietnam. He offers one model for historians who are interested in exploring the intersections between domestic politics and foreign policy.

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<sup>17</sup> On the conservative movement in the United States, see George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (New York, Basic Books, 1976); Donald T. Critchlow, "Rethinking American Conservatism: Toward a New Narrative," *The Journal of American History* 98:3 (2011): 752-755; Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History* 99 (December 2011), esp. 736. Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); David Farber, *The Rise and Fall of Modern American Conservatism: A Short History*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). For other works examining the relationship between conservatism and foreign policy see Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013) and Joyce Mao, *Asia First: China and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also Peter Hays Gries, *The Politics of American Foreign Policy: How Ideology Divides Liberals and Conservatives over Foreign Affairs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014) for a quantitative and social science methodological perspective on the issue.

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 RESPONSE BY SETH OFFENBACH, BRONX COMMUNITY COLLEGE
 

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It is both humbling and an honor to be involved in this roundtable process. I am truly appreciative of the reviewers' feedback, and I am thankful the editors whose work has kept this process organized. I am also grateful to Michael Brenes for his introduction to this roundtable. The feedback from Brenes and the reviewers is extremely helpful, as it will guide me during the process of thinking about my future work. Overall, the reviews of my book, *The Conservative Movement and the Vietnam War*, make it clear that this is an important scholarly contribution to the field of mid-century conservative history. In addition, it leaves open room for many more scholars to develop new avenues of inquiry.

Addison Jenson's review offers a thoughtful summary of the book's main arguments. She recognizes that my main purpose for writing this book was to better understand the period in the conservative movement from the late 1960s through the 1970s. When I began my research, I was asking the question of how the right responded to the rising anti-war movement in the United States. As Jenson notes, that question illuminated much of my research. She suggests that I could have brought more details about the rise of evangelicals into the book. While that topic certainly would have thickened the monograph, it felt outside of the scope of my research and I doubt that I would have been able to add much detail considering the incredible work that has already been done in the field.<sup>18</sup>

Whereas Jenson would have liked to see more details about the rise of Christian evangelicals in mainstream politics, Sarah Katherine Mergel would have appreciated an expansion of my chapter about President Richard Nixon's relationship with the Right. Mergel recommends that I offer more details about Nixon's domestic politics. I agree that this is an area for further study, as Nixon offered several policies which truly antagonized the Right, such as wage and price controls, environmental protections, and increased funding to states. Still, I chose to focus my discussion almost exclusively on the right's response to his Vietnam policies. The primary reason for this decision is that I took my queue from the sources. The primary sources were clearly mostly interested and animated by his Vietnamization plan. While wage and price controls upset many conservatives, their anger was marginal compared to their responses to Nixon's war plans. Moreover, a proper analysis of the right's response to Nixon's domestic policies would have required at least one extra chapter in the book, which would have pushed the book off course. I am gratified that Mergel's other comments reveal a clear appreciation for the way in which my work helps shine a new light on how the conservative movement changed during this period and how the movement responded to the contradiction which underpinned conservatives: the movement demanded victory in Vietnam despite knowing that such a victory was impossible.

More than the other reviews, Jacqueline E. Whitt's focuses on the policies of the Vietnam War. She deftly notes the book's presentation of the contradictions in the right's foreign policy for the 1960s and early 1970s. She also notes my argument that the right was looking at Vietnam solely through a political lens, as many of its suggested tactics were attempted by the U.S. military. There was never any acknowledgement of this reality by conservatives. Whitt asks whether the events inside Vietnam truly matter to my work or if they were merely part of the backdrop. The answer is both. While it mattered whether the U.S. achieved victory or suffered defeat in Vietnam, the nuances of how the war was fought were remarkably irrelevant to the political pundits and movement members. This is surprising, especially since Vietnam was talked about with more force and vigor than any other topic of the period. The sheer redundancy of the right's strategy was in fact maddening to review. As I note in the book, the Vietnam War was being used as part of a larger political fight taking place in the United States.

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<sup>18</sup> I cite the following works in the book: William A. Link, *Righteous Warrior: Jesse Helms and the Rise of Modern Conservatism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008); William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 2005); Alex R. Schafer, *Piety and Public Funding: Evangelicals and the State in Modern America* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Many excellent new works have since been published.

Whitt also notes that the group that I label “evangelical anti-Communists” should have been labeled “white evangelical anti-Communists.” This is a fair and accurate point. Gregory L. Schneider also believed that the term “negative conservatism” should have been labeled “oppositional conservatism.” While this is an interesting suggestion, and I understand the logic behind it, I disagree. During the late 1960s, the Right lacked a truly positive message of what it supported and this hurt the movement. Schneider also argues that I should have paid more attention to the radical right, such as the John Birch Society. This is a fair point, though I have my doubts about the importance of the Society and I believe historians have perhaps focused on it more than the group deserves. Still, he is correct that I should have engaged this point more directly. Though we have different historical views about the changes which took place in conservatism during this period, ultimately, Schneider and I agree that “rather than weakening the movement or its commitment to anti-Communism, Vietnam wound up strengthening it.”

Overall, these reviews offered me much to think about. At times, they challenge some of my arguments and decisions, but they also offer me incredible support in demonstrating the value and importance of my research. I am truly appreciative of the reviews and of the efforts of the reviewers.