

Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam. *By Thomas Alan Schwartz.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003. 352 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-674-01074-4.

Reviewed by Charles E. Neu

Historians have not been kind in their judgments of Lyndon Johnson's conduct of American foreign policy. They have portrayed him as a culture-bound leader, vulnerable to clichés and stereotypes and prone to crude behavior, one who lacked any independent instinct in dealing with other nations. Although scholars agree that LBJ proceeded cautiously and consulted a wide range of advisers, most emphasize the large gap between his performance in the domestic arena and his conduct of foreign affairs.

While Thomas Alan Schwartz does not dismiss this traditional account, he believes that it is incomplete, and that a careful examination of LBJ's diplomacy toward Europe reveals him to have been a much more skillful foreign-policy leader than he has been given credit for. Historians have been misled, he argues, by focusing too much on LBJ's first year in office—when he concentrated on domestic matters—and too much on the Vietnam War, allowing their preoccupation with Vietnam to obscure less dramatic events taking place in Europe. Schwartz finds that LBJ, after he settled into office, became “an astute and able practitioner of alliance politics” (p. 7), one who developed a keen understanding of the perspectives and preoccupations of European leaders and who dominated the foreign policy process. His policy toward Europe, Schwartz writes, was “one of the most important achievements of his presidency” (p. 225).

This impressive book—drawing on many interviews and extensive research in American and European archives—traces the wide range of issues between the United States and France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union during the Johnson years. Schwartz describes Charles De Gaulle's challenge to American leadership of the Western Alliance, examines Germany's concerns about the control of nuclear weapons and the reliability of the American commitment, explains the recurring economic crises in Great Britain and American attempts to preserve a British presence east of Suez, and charts the movement of the United States and the Soviet Union toward détente. He

unravels a series of complex negotiations—over arms control, the future of NATO, a Multilateral Force, and international economic issues—with considerable skill, and asserts that LBJ—determined to combat nationalism and unilateralism—effectively pursued his vision of a further integration of Europe and a relaxation of cold war tensions. In dealing with his European counterparts, LBJ displayed a shrewd understanding of power relationships and alliance politics. Schwartz concludes that he was “an effective leader of the Atlantic alliance” (p. 227).

Schwartz also argues that historians have exaggerated the impact of the Vietnam War on America’s European allies. While the war increased popular discontent with the United States, he notes that its impact on actual policies “is difficult to ascertain” (pp. 85–6). European leaders had differing views of the war—ranging from De Gaulle’s hostility to Ludwig Erhard’s support—but all subordinated their feelings about it to more fundamental national interests. The interdependence of the United States and its European allies was far too profound to allow any of these leaders to pursue a single issue too far. Thus British Prime Minister Harold Wilson opposed LBJ’s policies in Vietnam and hoped to play a role as mediator, but Wilson and LBJ in effect compartmentalized the war, agreeing to put aside their differences while they dealt with economic and alliance issues. Schwartz is not interested in engaging in counterfactual history, in speculating on how much more LBJ might have achieved in Europe without the conflict in Vietnam. He believes that LBJ’s limited war there brought losses as well as gains and that—given the international and domestic context of the time—it is difficult to imagine how he could have pursued a different path.

This thoroughly researched and well-crafted book offers many insights into LBJ’s behavior as a foreign-policy leader, correcting the overemphasis of many scholars on the Vietnam War as well as their negative portrayal of LBJ. In rejecting the more traditional view, however, Schwartz does not replace it with a firm alternative. The LBJ that emerges from these pages is in control of himself and of American foreign policy, but he remains an elusive and incomplete figure.

*Charles E. Neu is professor of history, emeritus, at Brown University. His most recent book is After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War (2000). He is completing a history of the*

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*Vietnam War, America's Lost War: Vietnam, 1945–1975, which will be published by Harlan Davidson.*