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U.S. LEADERS CHOSE WAR OVER NEGOTIATION IN VIETNAM

The lives lost must top the list in any accounting of the cost of war.

In the case of the Vietnam War, those numbers add up to nearly 60,000 Americans and between 3 million and 4 million Vietnamese.

To University of California, Santa Barbara history professor Fredrik Logevall, those deaths are all the more tragic and troubling because he believes, contrary to prevailing American myth, that the war could have been averted.

"The Vietnam tragedy, which we are still living with in so many ways, which led to deaths of millions, was an unnecessary war," says Logevall, who presents a powerful case for that statement in his just-published book, "Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam" (University of California Press).

Logevall spent six years in archives around the world researching "Choosing War."

He began his quest with three fundamental questions:

What caused the war, could the war have been averted, and if so, then how?

What he found destroys the notion that the war was a morass that gripped the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson all the tighter the more they sought an honorable solution.

This was no quagmire, Logevall says.

Between August 1963 and February 1965, Kennedy and Johnson were presented with myriad peace initiatives that offered the U.S. opportunities for honorable and graceful disengagement.

For reasons rooted in pride and politics, they rejected them all.

Focusing on the formative years of 1963 through 1965, Logevall says the climate for a diplomatic solution was excellent for several reasons:-Viable alternatives to increasing American participation were being suggested at the highest levels of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.-Key American leaders and virtually all the United States' allies -- including Britain, France, Canada and Japan -- opposed escalation in favor of negotiation.-Many war-weary South Vietnamese would have welcomed a settlement.-The North Vietnamese government was prepared to negotiate to allow a face-saving U.S. disengagement.-The Soviet Union also favored negotiation as did U.N. secretary-general U Thant.

So what went wrong?

Logevall places some blame on the opponents of escalation, who he feels were far too timid in making their case in those early days.

But he heaps most of the responsibility on Kennedy, Johnson and key advisors Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara, who in an effort to support their own credibility as fighters of communism in preparation for the rhetoric of the 1964 presidential campaign spent more time trying to scuttle negotiation than foster it.

Due to their influence, Logevall says, at no time in those early days of the war was there so much as a contingency plan for negotiating a peaceful settlement.

Logevall chastizes Kennedy with the title of the president's own award-winning book, remarking that JFK was "no profile in courage on Vietnam." Johnson, he says, was motivated by fear of "the personal humiliation that he believed would come with failure in Vietnam."

Logevall's research of

"Choosing War" earned him the praise of America's foremost Vietnam War scholars, including historian George C. Herring of the University of Kentucky, considered dean

of the lot.

"Stunning in its research and highly sophisticated in its analysis, 'Choosing War' is far and away the best study we have of Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the conflict in Vietnam," Herring said.

Other reviewers were equally enthusiastic.

"In this fine book, Fredrik Logevall offers the first detailed examination of why diplomacy failed to head off the Vietnam War," said John Prados, author of "The Hidden History of the Vietnam War" and many other books on the topic.

"Grounding himself in documentary research and other sources from several countries, Logevall comes closer than anyone ever has to explaining what happened."

And from University of Virginia historian Timothy Naftali: "A rising star among a new generation of historians, Fredrik Logevall has written the most important Vietnam book in years."

Naftali's praise comes just months after publication of McNamara's second effort to explain the war, "Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy" (PublicAffairs).

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