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Walter S. Poole, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, vol. 8: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1961-1964*. Washington: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [US GPO], 2011. Pp. xiv, 378. ISBN 978-0-16-087904-3.

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Walter Poole's study of the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in national security policy is the result of decades of documentary research and personal interviews. It converts a classified history meant for internal use into an accessible study of the inner workings, debates, tensions, principles, and uncertainties behind critical decisions in national security policy, military strategy, force structure planning, and crisis management at the height of the Cold War. Poole, a veteran historian at and of the JCS, interviewed such major actors as Generals Lyman Lemnitzer and Maxwell Taylor and Admirals George Anderson and Arleigh Burke. From the perspective of the Chiefs, he writes a clearly structured narrative of the strategy and policies of the John F. Kennedy and early Lyndon B. Johnson administrations. (In a subsequent volume,<sup>1</sup> he extends this history through 1968.)

Poole follows a disciplined thematic approach, in which each chapter is devoted to a discrete issue (for example, "Strategic Priorities" or "The Far East: Seeking a Strategy") and may be read profitably on its own. The only exception is the two chapters on NATO. One of these presents Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's efforts in 1961-62 to persuade the European allies (Britain, France, West Germany) to adopt a new strategy of flexible response, build larger conventional armies, and join the United States in an integrated, multilateral nuclear force. The second concerns the faltering of these initiatives over discord on nuclear weapons and disagreement on firebreaks.

These NATO chapters evince a sharp focus on the fundamental divide between an administration intent on "flexible response" and conventional warfare, on the one hand, and the JCS, who doubted the deterrent effect and operational feasibility of such a strategy, on the other. Poole, agreeing with the Joint Chiefs, points out that the Soviets' adoption of a nuclear-warfare doctrine made White House and Defense Department notions of limited war, whether conventional or nuclear, unrealistic (215).

A leitmotif of the book is the frustrating personal and professional relationships of the Chiefs and their civilian superiors and the tensions both internal and with White House Military Representative (and later JCS Chairman) General Maxwell Taylor. Indeed, between the lines, we detect a serious crisis in civil-military relations. Poole mainly blames civilian leaders, but implies that Air Force and Navy leaders, in particular, did not always engage the administration in good faith. Admirals Arleigh Burke and George Anderson resented McNamara's hands-on management style at the Pentagon and interference with operational issues. Air Force generals Curtis E. LeMay and Thomas White never trusted the defense intellectuals at the White House. Marine Corps commandant General David Shoup is portrayed as obscurantist and, at times, self-contradictory. Only the chairmen, first General Lemnitzer and, from October 1962, General Taylor, appear as capable managers and effective advisers (297-301). Poole acknowledges that Taylor was eyed with suspicion by the service chiefs, who wondered just what his precise role was and doubted that he always represented their positions faithfully. But he mentions the issue only briefly, citing a passage in Taylor's own memoir. I would have liked to see him engage other historians' more sharply critical arguments.<sup>2</sup>

One wonders, too, about the omission of a chapter on policy toward Vietnam in this otherwise comprehensive treatment of the linked crises in various regions of the global Cold War. Apparently Poole, or

1. Specifically, vol. 9: *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1965-1968* (2012).

2. See, e.g., H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (NY: HarperCollins, 1997).

someone in the JCS history office, decided to de-emphasize escalation of the American involvement in Vietnam in the Kennedy years, perhaps because the Vietnam War occupies several other volumes of the JCS history.<sup>3</sup> In any case, this allows Poole to highlight overlooked matters between the Berlin and Cuban crises of 1961–62 and the escalation in Vietnam in 1964–65: continental defense, arms control, nuclear testing, military assistance programs, and events in the Middle East, Africa (especially the Congo Crisis), and South and East Asia. Thus, both the global nature of the Cold War and the importance of Europe and the NATO alliance appear more clearly. But, at the same time, the number of US military advisers in South Vietnam was growing exponentially between 1961 and 1964, the Military Assistance Advisory Group was supplanted by Military Assistance Command (MACV), and American air power began to play a greater part in the war against guerrilla fighters as well as North Vietnamese regulars. Of course, in 1961, Laos, Cuba, and Berlin weighed more heavily on the minds of the service chiefs, and the Cuban Missile Crisis took center stage in fall 1962. But, given Poole's perceptive discussion of the risk of war with North Vietnam and China over Laos, he should have given more consideration to South Vietnam's war, the American advisory effort, and strategic concerns in the region.

Though he rarely interjects his own opinions into the narrative, Poole does establish a clear argument, generally siding with the Chiefs over the White House and the Defense Department. He is not, however, uncritical of the JCS: he sometimes unveils manipulative practices in position papers and ambiguous language in planning memoranda apparently meant to mislead Secretary McNamara. For example, in the planning stages of the Bay of Pigs debacle, the JCS led McNamara to believe the invasion plan was “basically sound,” even though internal calculations gave it only a 30 percent chance of success (110). But, like the Chiefs of the 1960s, Poole is wary of the brash managerial style of President Kennedy, Secretary McNamara, and their principal advisers. The JCS wanted clear guidance and complained that decisions made in the National Security Council never seemed final. They were gravely concerned about the credibility of American military power in the Cold War and the willingness of the new generation of civilian leaders to see conflicts through to the end.

Poole concludes that flexible response lacked clarity of purpose and that the administration failed to build up sufficient conventional forces—American or Allied—to sustain a sound strategy. The issue of balancing conventional and tactical nuclear forces is particularly revealing, not only as regards the defense of Europe or deterrence of war there. Poole reminds us that the specter of limited nuclear war arose in East and Southeast Asia as well. When Laos appeared on the brink of falling to the communist Pathet Lao in late April 1961, just days after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the National Security Council contemplated US military intervention and a wider regional war: the Air Force and Navy chiefs recommended that ground forces should be deployed, whereas Army and Marine Corps leaders favored a buildup of strength in Thailand and South Vietnam, believing involvement in remote, landlocked Laos would be problematic and might draw in both North Vietnam and China in great force. And war with China, the JCS agreed, would require nuclear weapons. In fact, both here and in the later chapter on the Far East, one senses that the military establishment felt war with China was inevitable and wanted to wage it sooner rather than later.

Almost as an aside, Poole addresses the linkage of China and Vietnam in noting that the Chiefs in May 1961 were agreed that any major war in Southeast Asia would require the United States to strike directly at Hanoi and at the People's Republic of China. Following General White's lead, they advised McNamara that the US military “could conduct ‘full-scale non-nuclear war’ in Laos and North Vietnam—but not against China” (131). As the chapter on the Far East demonstrates, strategic and operational priorities for the region remained muddled and gradual escalation in Vietnam in the mid-1960s “undid General Taylor's efforts to impose a nuclear strategy” for all of East Asia (296).

This broaches deeper issues in Poole's narrative: the national security apparatus was divided during the crises of 1961–62, critical functions were poorly defined, and strong personalities could dominate the discus-

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3. Jack Shulimson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960–1968*, part 1 (2011); Graham A. Cosmas, part 2 (2012); and Willard J. Webb and Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1971–1973* (2007)—all published by the Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

sion. Above all, it remained unclear where the responsibilities of military advisers ended. For example, in the debates over intervention in Laos, Admiral Burke and General White were prepared to give firm and bellicose advice, while Generals George Decker (Army Chief of Staff) and Shoup were much more circumspect. Decker neither opposed nor endorsed intervention, since that was “a political decision” (130).

Comparable schisms and uncertainties emerged during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the decision to try a naval blockade, or quarantine, before authorizing air strikes and perhaps an invasion of Cuba was made in a surprisingly cavalier way and against the advice of the Chiefs. Late in the day on 18 October, the crisis staff at the White House had swung from favoring airstrikes, which McNamara initially advocated, to the quarantine, in hopes of finding a diplomatic solution. Earlier that day, the JCS had identified somewhat different priorities:

When the JCS reconvened at 1400, Taylor summarized the latest meeting [at the White House], saying the President seemed to feel we should hold back on military action until we got a sense of the Soviet response. Were we really going to do anything except talk, LeMay inquired? Certainly, the Chairman answered. Probably the order of events would be: a political approach; a warning; air attack on the missile sites; blockade; and, if necessary, invasion. The JCS now directed that one battalion of the 5th Marine Expeditionary Brigade be airlifted from California to Guantanamo, that Opalacka airfield in Florida be reopened, and that twenty interceptors deploy to Florida bases. The JCS also decided that the earliest feasible date for an air strike would be Sunday, 21 October. The optimum date was 23 October; an invasion could begin on 28 October. (169)

It is, of course, now quite clear that the JCS assessment was wrong and the administration approach the correct one. But in a structural sense, the question whether the JCS was a strategic advisory body or a clearinghouse for operational plans remained unanswered.

It may be too much to ask a government history that began as a classified study nearly half a century ago to take account of recent secondary literature.<sup>4</sup> The very nature and intent of official history has seemed to preclude dialogue between government historians and academic scholars. I do not mean this as a criticism of the author as much as of the genre itself, which could reach and inform a much wider audience. Walter Poole certainly offers an enlightening inside perspective on how the Kennedy administration confronted the many challenges of the global Cold War during the year-and-a-half crisis from the Bay of Pigs to the Cuban missiles, and how it tried to shift national and alliance strategy from the threat of massive retaliation to the proportional approach of flexible response. In so doing, he has contributed a significant policy study and military history to the growing body of Cold War scholarship.

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4. E.g., Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2006).