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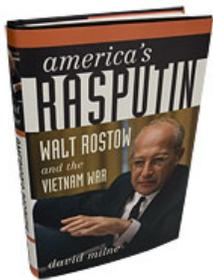
BOOKS

LBJ Was Listening

By Robert K. Landers

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He had given the candidate some of his best lines -- about getting the country "moving again" and meeting the challenge of the "New Frontier" -- and Walt Whitman Rostow, an eminent theorist of economic development, was rewarded with a high-level White House job: deputy special assistant for national security affairs. But before the year was out, President Kennedy became disenchanted with his adviser's martial-mindedness and banished him to the Policy Planning Council in the State Department. "Walt is a fountain of ideas; perhaps one in ten of them is absolutely brilliant," Kennedy explained. "Unfortunately six or seven are not merely unsound, but dangerously so."



Little more than four years later, in 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson brought the exile back to the White House to be his national security adviser. "He's going to be my goddamn intellectual," the president exulted, "and I'm going to have him by his short hairs." The congenitally optimistic Rostow -- ever ready to drop more bombs and dispatch more troops in pursuit of military victory -- was now in a position to be one of the leading architects of America's tragic misadventure in Vietnam. And it is for Vietnam that we now most remember him.

In his formative years, Rostow (1916-2003) had never known failure. As David Milne recounts in "America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War," Rostow's brilliance was recognized early and often. The middle son of a Russian-born chemist and his wife (secular Jews and democratic socialists), he skipped grades in school and entered Yale in 1932 at the age of 15. Two years later he decided that he would henceforth devote his intellectual endeavors to studying economic history and one day "answering" Karl Marx's theory of history. He graduated from Yale in 1936, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford and eventually returned to Yale to pick up a Ph.D. He joined what would become the Office of Strategic Services as war neared in 1941.

DETAILS

America's Rasputin

By David Milne

(Hill and Wang, 320 pages, \$26)

Stationed in London, Rostow was assigned to identify the most opportune German military targets for Allied bombing. His claim that Germany's oil-storage facilities were the key target was not accepted at first, but events proved him right. He remained ever after convinced that if his advice on that point had

been taken more quickly, the war would have ended sooner.

Rostow's important wartime work, for which he received several prestigious decorations to add to his Yale and Oxford degrees, gave him a heightened sense of self-confidence, Mr. Milne points out. An offer from Harvard to be a full professor at age 29 did nothing to lessen it. Rostow chose instead to return to Oxford and then to work for Gunnar Myrdal on the postwar reconstruction of Europe.

In 1950, Rostow became a professor of economic history at MIT, where he eventually produced his "answer" to Marx: "The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto." He argued that all nations pass through certain stages, progressing from "traditional society" to

"takeoff" and finally reaching "the age of high mass consumption." His magnum opus was well-received and widely noted.

Impressed by his work on economic development and his strong advocacy of U.S. foreign aid to developing countries, Kennedy sought Rostow out in the late 1950s and then recruited him for his presidential campaign. In the White House, the economic development theorist-turned-deputy national security adviser suggested as early as the summer of 1961 the possibility of bombing and invading North Vietnam. The "Rostow Thesis," as it came to be called, was that imposing "graduated" military pressure on North Vietnam through bombing would cause Hanoi -- as Rostow put it in a 1964 memo -- to "call off the war principally because of its fear that it would otherwise risk loss of its politically important industrial development."

In 1965, the Johnson administration implemented the strategy of graduated bombing (which, Mr. Milne neglects to note, also owed something to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's reading of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which the graduated application of military pressure was used to send "messages" to the Soviet Union). But the North Vietnamese proved less attached to their nascent industrial development than Rostow's theory said they should be. As the failure of the graduated strategy became apparent, Johnson ordered 50,000 ground troops to South Vietnam and of course, over time, many thousands more. Rostow repeatedly pushed for escalation, discounting fears of Chinese intervention or nuclear war. As McNamara and others grew disillusioned, Rostow became, in Mr. Milne's words, LBJ's "most trusted adviser on foreign affairs."

But Rostow was no Rasputin. The book's unfortunate title, suggesting secret powers and cunning influence, derives from a snide remark by Averell Harriman, who, as one of the Kennedy advisers who encouraged the 1963 coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, himself deserves a share of the blame for the Americanization of the war. Mr. Milne claims that Rostow had a "mesmerizing effect" on Johnson, but LBJ's refusal to go along with Rostow's recommendation to invade Laos and North Vietnam shows that the president was not exactly spellbound. A better title for the book would have been "Prophet of Victory," for that was how Rostow saw himself.

Mr. Milne, a young scholar who was born after the Vietnam War, is a thorough researcher, and his readable narrative is full of interest. But he would have done better, on occasion, to acknowledge the possibility that Rostow's advice could have been right. In April 1967, for instance, Rostow and the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged Johnson (unsuccessfully) to put 200,000 troops into Laos to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail, by which North Vietnam routinely moved men and materiel into South Vietnam. Nearly 30 years later, retired North Vietnamese Col. Bui Tin conceded that if the vital supply line had been cut, "Hanoi could not have won the war." Rostow -- who despite his deep disappointment at Johnson's rejection of this advice, stayed with him almost to the very end of his presidency -- devoted a chapter to this important subject in "Concept and Controversy" (2003), a posthumously published memoir, but Mr. Milne slides by it.

Too often "America's Rasputin" has an excessively polemical cast. Rostow was thus not only a faulty Vietnam adviser, in Mr. Milne's view, but a proto-neocon: Paul Wolfowitz and other architects of the Iraq war inherited his "internationalist, crusading mantle." Even Rostow's anticommunism comes in for criticism. Mr. Milne, unafraid of cant, pronounces it "rigid," "unreflective," "strident" and "virulent."

The problem with Rostow was not his anticommunism but his preference for theory over empirical reality, his apparent certitude about matters that were inherently unsettled, and his insensitivity to the limits of American power. Even his wife, as he related in "Concept and Controversy," once asked him: "Have you ever thought that you might be wrong on Vietnam?" Looking at her "in some amazement," he replied: "Of course! Often. But I've gazed like hell at the alternatives and this is the painful best choice." About that he was certain.

Mr. Landers, a Vietnam veteran, is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter).