Busch, Peter: *All the Way With JFK? Britain, the US and the Vietnam War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003. ISBN: 0-19-925639-X; 240 p.

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Ever since the emergence of that elusive ‚special relationship' between the United States and the United Kingdom, British politicians and diplomats have argued that London has been able to effectively influence decision-making processes in Washington through a combination of public approval of American foreign policy, strategic alignments, and corrective advice given behind-the-scenes. The 'special relationship', its proponents have claimed, provided Britain, a European middle power with worldwide interests after World War Two, with the opportunity to constrain a sometimes bellicose United States and to infuse the Department of State with the rationality, restraint, and experience of Whitehall´s centuries-old approach to world affairs. Statesmen from Balfour to Blair have argued that to be an insider not only enhanced British interests but lifted some of the clouds that impaired the mental maps of officials at Foggy Bottom. In his study on Anglo-American policies towards Vietnam in the early 1960s, Peter Busch now accuses Britain of having failed to play its part in the 'special relationship': „Britain did nothing to steer Washington away from the path that led to the Vietnam quagmire" (p. 206).

Scholarly competition and the marketing strategies of publishing houses seem to give rise to a desire for holistic theses and a need for the dramatic. But since most readers who are familiar with the business are aware of such tactics, readers will no doubt leave Busch´s detour into post-mortem didactics aside and focus on the densely packed, well-written and exhaustively documented history of a largely-neglected but important aspect of British policy. Peter Busch has rightly opted for a thematically-structured approach to unravel the complexities of Britain´s aims and position in Southeast Asia between the transfer of sovereignty in Malaya (1957), the escalating conflict in Vietnam, and Indonesia´s efforts to crush London´s „grand design", the integration of the British territories in North Borneo with Singapore and Malaya into the Federation of Malaysia, between 1963 and 1966. While the study is important for an understanding of Britain´s objectives in the region as a whole, Peter Busch´s aim is more modest: he wants to challenge the view that Britain lost interest in Vietnam after the Geneva Conference on Indochina (1954), and he wants to correct the perception that there is a continuity from Anthony Eden´s compromise solution – the partition and neutralization of the country – to Harold Wilson´s efforts in 1965 to alert the Johnson Administration to the dangers of an all-out American engagement in Vietnam.

Previous studies of Britain´s policy in Southeast Asia after World War Two have already highlighted the premises on which its objectives were based: an interest in the decolonization of Malaya on favorable economic and strategic terms; a determination to crush the forces that were inimical to Britain´s design of an anti-communist greater Malaya and a non-communist region as a whole; and the need to actively involve the United States in order to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.[1]

In order to assert its role as an important external actor in the region and to prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, Britain became an active member in the American-sponsored Southeast Asian Treaty Organization. While SEATO strategic planning remained „academic" (p. 33) and while none of the member states (with the exception of Thailand) had an actual interest in utilizing its machinery for conflict resolution in Laos or Vietnam, Peter Busch convincingly demonstrates that the organization enabled Britain from 1955 onwards to „stay in close touch with the American allies and influence

[1] Hack, Karl, Defence and Decolonization in Southeast Asia. Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1941-68, Richmond 2001; Remme, Tilman, Britain and Regional Cooperation in South-East Asia, 1945-49, London 1995; Stubbs, Richard, Hearts and Minds in Guerilla Warfare. The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960, Singapore 1993; Subritzky, John, Confronting Sukarno. British, American, Australian and New Zealand Diplomcy in the Malaysian-Indonesia Confrontation, 1961-65, London 2000.

their policy if possible“ (p. 34). Apart from that, SEATO connected the British effort to fight the communist insurrection in Malaya (the so-called Emergency) to the larger Anglo-American aim of preventing a communist expansion in the region as a whole.

Vietnam posed a particularly intractable problem for Britain. As co-chairman of the Geneva Conference, it had an interest in a divided Vietnam and in maintaining the status quo. But as the communist rebellion against the repressive South Vietnamese regime of Ngo Dinh Diem gained momentum in the late 1950s and while the United States progressively increased its commitment, Britain did not want to play the role of peacemaker again. As Busch makes clear, concerns over the spread of communism prompted British prime minister Harold Macmillan to „support American policy in Vietnam wholeheartedly“ (p. 63). To this end, Britain sought to influence Canada and India, the non-communist members of the International Control Commission (ICC) – a body set up in 1954/55 to monitor conditions in Vietnam – to refrain from criticizing American violations of the Geneva agreements, most notably the prohibition to introduce military personnel in South Vietnam. Busch´s treatment of the much-neglected ICC is a welcome addition to the international history of the conflict in Vietnam. In his conclusion, however, he remains on shaky grounds and contradicts his overall thesis. On the one hand, he contends that „a different British attitude towards negotiations might have made an impact [...] in that it would have strengthened those forces in Washington and Hanoi that were advocating a Laos-like conference on Vietnam“ [i.e. the neutralization] (p. 57). On the other hand, he - in my view correctly - states that „even a hostile ICC would not have deterred the Americans“ (p. 61). There is in fact no serious evidence that either the Eisenhower- or the Kennedy-Administration cared much about the Geneva agreement and its implementing body, the ICC, apart from efforts to circumvent both.[2]

The strongest and most compelling part of the study is Busch´s analysis of the establishment of the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) in South Vietnam in 1961. Headed by counterinsurgency specialist Robert Thompson, a distinguished veteran of the Malayan Emergency, the outfit advised the Diem regime and the American military on anti-guerilla warfare. Initially, the American military strongly opposed the mission, but State Department approval for a „British presence in Saigon“ (p. 91) prevailed. Busch looks at the increasingly frustrating efforts to make Diem implement Thompson´s advice, and he presents new details on the evolution of the notorious ‘Strategic Hamlet Program’.[3] While Thompson continued to write positive reports about the performance of the Diem regime, London became increasingly concerned about developments in South Vietnam. By the summer of 1963, Whitehall was convinced that Diem was doomed to fail. It did not, however, participate in the American-supported military coup against him. All in all, the mission did not have much of an impact because „the British simply wanted to follow the Americans' lead, and there was no willingness to influence US policy on Diem one way or the other“ (p. 172).

In a final chapter, Busch connects the American anti-communist effort in Vietnam with the British policy towards the Indonesian *Konfrontasi* vis-à-vis the Malaysian „grand design“. While the British were determined to oppose Sukarno´s low-intensity warfare on Borneo (Kalimantan), the Americans initially favored a compromise solution that would have given Indonesia a say in the organization of the territory. Busch rightly argues that „Britain was keen to prove to the Americans that it could look after its own interests and that its military power was useful to the common western cause“ (p. 181). He is less successful, though, in explaining the initial American hesitancy towards a military solution of the conflict in Borneo. Like Sukarno, Washington perceived the conflict as a strug-

[2] Anderson, David L., Trapped by Success. The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961, New York 1991; McMahon, Robert J., The Limits of Empire. The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II, New York 1999, p. 69-144.

[3] The best treatment of the Strategic Hamlet Program is Catton, Philip E., Diem's Final Failure. Prelude to America´s War in Vietnam, Lawrence 2002. Catton´s study is based on Vietnamese sources.

gle for decolonization, and it did not want to become associated with colonialism if possible. Moreover, after a decade of progressively deteriorating American-Indonesian relations and serious American blunders like the ill-fated 1957/58 CIA-operation to split Indonesia, the Kennedy Administration desperately tried to reverse this downward spiral. *Konfrontasi*, however, also had a positive effect on Britain´s role and position in Southeast Asia after 1964: „it could tell the Americans that it could not go beyond giving political support to the United States in Vietnam" (p. 192).

Peter Busch makes an important addition to the growing literature on international aspects of the conflict in Vietnam.[4] He has unravelled the myths surrounding Thompson´s activities in South Vietnam, and he provides additional insight into the British determination to influence Southeast Asian affairs according to London´s objectives. Contrary to Busch´s assessment that „Britain´s Malaysia policy revealed the weakness of Britain and the limits of its power" (p. 205), it seems to me that Britain – through its small but temporarily important mission in South Vietnam and through its determination to oppose Sukarno in a massive effort encompassing some 60.000 troops at the height of *Konfrontasi* – utilized its relatively small resources in the most economical and efficient way possible. In contrast to the United States, which were forced out of Vietnam in 1973, Great Britain managed an orderly retreat from Empire. With regard to the 'special relationship', Busch makes it clear that to be an insider does not necessarily translate into influence.

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[4] Daum, Andreas W.; Gardner, Lloyd; Mausbach, Wilfried (Eds.), America, the Vietnam War, and the World. Comparative and International Perspectives, New York 2003; Logevall, Fredrik, Choosing War. The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam, Berkeley 1999.