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decolonisation: the Eisenhower
Administration, Britain and Singapore by S. R.
Joey Long

Anderson, David L.

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[This review was inadvertently omitted from the H-Diplo roundtable on S.R. Joey Long's Safe for Decolonization, which was published in May 2013, and can be accessed at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-31.pdf>

We are posting the piece today as a single review, and will add it to the roundtable website. The H-Diplo editors apologize to Professor Anderson.]

Review by David L. Anderson, California State University, Monterey Bay, and Naval Postgraduate School

In 2011, the international accounting firm Ernst & Young ranked Singapore third on its Globalization Index behind Hong Kong and Ireland. This measurement calculates the extent of global economic engagement relative to the gross domestic product of the sixty major economies of the world. There are various indices of globalization—that is, economic integration, technological connectivity, and political interaction of nations—and Singapore consistently stands at or near the top of such lists. Prior to the turmoil in the world economy that began in 2008, the small nation had ranked first on one globalization index for four out of seven years, and Singapore continues to be one of the global economy's principal trading hubs.¹

S. R. Joey Long's excellent monograph examines how the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower handled, and at times mishandled, the U.S. role in the transition of

¹ "Singapore Takes Third Spot on Globalization Index 2011," news release, February 8, 2012, Ernst & Young, http://www.ey.com/SG/en/Newsroom/News-releases/News-release_20120208_Singapore-takes-third-spot-on-Globalization-Index-2011; "The Globalization Index," *Foreign Policy* 163 (November/December 2007), 68-76.

Singapore from colony to nation-state and how American actions in the late 1950s left an “indelible imprint” on what is now a vibrant, independent Singapore (185). The pivotal importance of Singapore to the vitality and stability of Southeast Asia and, by extension, to the world was evident from the beginning of one of the first modern manifestations of globalization, the British colonial empire. As Britain dismantled its empire after World War II, the commercial and military value of this island that commands access to the Strait of Malacca made its post-colonial future a matter of intense interest not only to the people of Singapore and officials in London, but also to global strategists in Washington.

Long’s study of Singapore adds both needed data and helpful interpretive comparisons to a rich and growing literature on U.S. policies toward post-colonial Southeast Asia between 1945 and 1965, that is, from the end of World War II to the escalation of the U.S. war in Vietnam. : For example, Mark Lawrence has analyzed how leaders in Washington and the capitals of the European colonial nations had difficulty discerning whether national independence or Marxist revolution caused political upheaval in the region. . Kathryn Statler has argued that American attitudes toward Vietnam in the 1950s took on neocolonial attributes not unlike the behavior of the French officials who previously had sought to manage Indochina. Seth Jacobs has described a cultural arrogance, even racism, that characterized many American interactions with the people of Laos. Considering what these studies have found, Long’s research confirms that some of the same Cold-War fears and cultural biases existed in U.S. thinking about Singapore. He explains, however, that Washington’s behavior toward Singapore roughened the road to self-rule but did not detour decolonization into tragedy, as occurred in French Indochina. ²

There were several ways in which American global interests and policies affected Singapore. Long’s title, “safe for decolonization,” derives in large part from Washington’s acute fear that Singapore, once it was outside the tent of British colonial possession and protection, would fall victim to Chinese communists who had already demonstrated their political opportunism in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Malaya, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles labeled their version of America’s containment strategy ‘the New Look,’ and this defense doctrine against the presumptive aggressiveness of world communism had serious implications for Singapore. The New Look was a multifaceted strategy, and Long organizes much of his analysis around its various approaches. Central to the New Look was cost effectiveness gained by a combination of airborne atomic warfare, alliance diplomacy, covert operations, and psychological warfare.³ The nuclear deterrent threat, often termed ‘massive retaliation,’ had limited applicability to Singapore, although it did figure in the eventual basing of British bombers in Singapore that could deliver atomic weapons to targets in China. These

² Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

³ See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982), 146-61.

bases were part of Washington's coordination of defense planning with London through the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). Regional alliances like SEATO were basic to the New Look to serve as what Dulles termed "no trespassing" signs for aggressors like Moscow and Beijing.⁴ SEATO slowed decolonization. In the words of Singaporean nationalist David Marshall, the organization sought "to shackle the people of Singapore to colonial slavery in the name of the free world" (126).

In addition to nuclear deterrence and alliances, the Eisenhower team also had faith, often misplaced, in covert operations. As they had done in India and elsewhere in their empire, the British practiced what was known as "colonial democracy" (184). Through negotiations with various nationalist parties, Britain allowed for elections to decide local leadership as steps toward self-government, while the internal and external security of the colony remained temporarily under British control. A struggle for power, sometimes orderly and sometimes violent, is always part of a national revolution, and Singapore was no exception. British-mediated elections produced David Marshall, Lim Yew Hock, and finally Lee Kuan Yew as chief ministers. London allowed and, in effect, trusted this process as the best means to maintain British interests in its former colonies. Influenced by notions of rivalry with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China and the pressures of domestic American politics, Washington's Cold War strategists did not trust the process and engaged in various CIA moves to spy on, if not control, the internal workings of Singapore's political factions. Long details how these "injudiciously employed" covert operations were "counterproductive" and "critically undermined" the local leaders the United States actually sought to assist (154-55).

Almost all of Singapore's local political figures, regardless of their differences with each other, objected to American meddling, and preferred nonalignment to being dragged into the global Cold War, but Long perceptively observes that other factors ameliorated their resentment of Washington. For one, British decolonization processes were dramatically different from the French legacy in Indochina, which left violence and radicalism to plague that aspiring nation. This moderate environment allowed the other New Look tool, psychological warfare, an opportunity to be effective. Voice of America radio programs, touring American musicians and sports figures, Hollywood movies, and even the United States Information Service Library (the first public library in Singapore) helped build a reservoir of goodwill toward the United States. An example of this positive imaging, the soft power of American culture, was seen in Lee Kwan Yew, the Machiavellian survivor of the internal political battles, who professed to like much about the United States despite Washington's initial efforts to block his political successes. As Lee put it privately, "remember all the time that we are not dealing with an enemy, but the bloody stupidity of a friend" (176).

In the developing world during the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration's Cold War preoccupations often alienated local leaders or exposed local people to violent civil wars.

⁴ Quoted in David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 71.

Scholars have found much to question about those U.S. policies.⁵ Long’s research demonstrates how the worst of these outcomes did not occur in Singapore, and it suggests that Eisenhower’s concern about costs that produced the New Look also had a long term positive effect on Singapore’s economic development. Conservative officials in Washington favored a development strategy of trade and private investment over direct government aid. This approach has been characterized as favoring Western capitalists over meeting urgent human needs in some poor countries.⁶ It is sometimes termed economic liberalism or modernization theory, which was advanced in the 1950s by economist Walt W. Rostow, among others. As National Security Adviser to Lyndon B. Johnson, Rostow was an architect of what was one of the worst public policy decisions in U.S. history—to persist in the use of military force in the name of nation-building in South Vietnam. Rostow himself later argued that the U.S. war in Vietnam provided time and opportunity for regional states like Singapore to experience the economic takeoff that his theory had predicted.⁷ As Long notes, British Singapore was not French Indochina, and there are many reasons that history took a different course in each place. Today, Vietnam is 33rd on Ernst & Young’s Globalization Index.⁸ The globalization scoreboard does not mean that Rostow and other nation builders were correct on Vietnam. Long makes a provocative observation, however, that, in retrospect, Eisenhower’s “tenet that trade and private investment rather than aid would better spur economic development in developing countries” has been vindicated in one case at least (116).

David L. Anderson is Professor of History at California State University, Monterey Bay, and Senior Lecturer of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. His recent books include *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (2007), *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War* (2011), and *The Lowdown: A Short History of the Origins of the Vietnam War* (2011). Anderson is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.

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⁵ Kathryn C. Statler and Andy Johns, eds., *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

⁶ Burton I. Kaufman, *Trade and Aid: Eisenhower’s Foreign Economic Policy, 1953-1961* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 162.

⁷ Walt W. Rostow, “Vietnam and Asia,” *Diplomatic History* 20 (Summer 1996): 467-71. With regard to Eisenhower, however, Rostow did not find him to be consistent on foreign aid policy. See Walt W. Rostow, *Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Foreign Aid* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

⁸ “Singapore Takes Third Spot.”