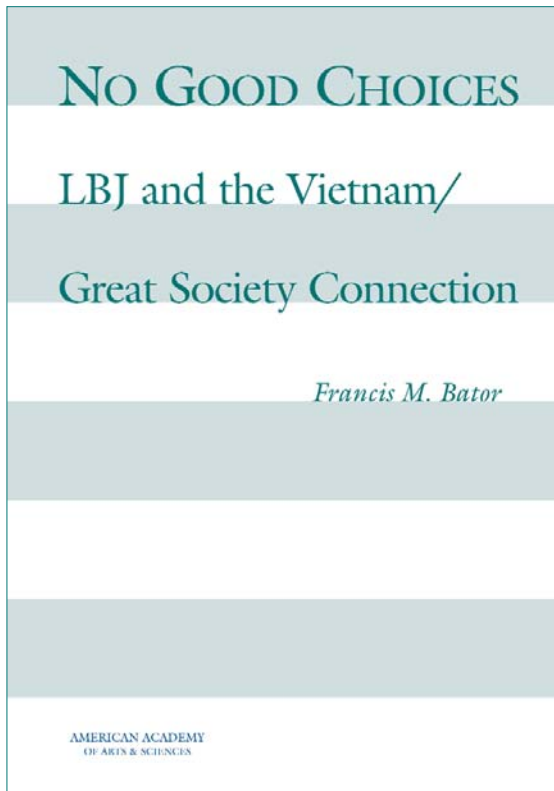


AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES

New Occasional Paper



No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/ Great Society Connection by Francis M. Bator

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Executive Summary

In late 1964, Richard Neustadt described Lyndon Johnson as the quintessential master of presidential power, fiercely attentive to the consequences of current choices for his future options. *Why then did Johnson in 1965 knowingly bet his presidency on an unexamined strategy in an unexplained war that he knew to be a poor gamble?* Facts make nonsense of the theory that Johnson, supposedly fearful of the domino effect and insecure about foreign policy, blindly followed the advice of his hawkish Kennedy advisors. The alternative explanation, here spelled out and tested against the evidence, focuses on how Johnson's determination to enact the civil rights and social reforms of 1965 – 1968 affected his Vietnam decisions. He believed (and he knew how to count votes) that if he backed away in Vietnam – or told the country the truth, that he was Americanizing the war – the legislation would be stillborn in Congress. He knowingly made a bad bet abroad in order to complete and expand the social transformation of the United States begun with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. In the balance, he lost his presidency.