Economists with Guns draws on US-Indonesian relations in the 1960s to show how the Cold War played out on the fringes of the US alliance system. The core message is a powerful one: if we are to understand the connections between the Cold War and US hegemony in the Third World, then we need to capture the intricate process whereby Washington tried (but only partially succeeded) to co-opt local elites through the power of ideas, money, and force.

US officials approached Indonesia through influential social--scientific ideas about the purported links between stability, economic growth, anti-communism, and control of indigenous populations. The dominant notion was that an alliance with conservative, but modernising elites in Jakarta could play a role in securing US hegemony in that part of the world. Policy implementation, however, proved difficult due to real clashes of interests and mutual misperception. Indigenous forms of nationalism in the post-colonial world and domestic politics further complicated the equation. The arguments that run through Economists with Guns are therefore consequential for those with an interest in Iran, South Korea, Brazil, and many other large developing countries during the Cold War.

Simpson argues that US involvement in Indonesia under the banner of modernisation was counter-productive in the mid-term. The logic and methods behind that policy actually hurt the quest for development and democracy. They helped create an environment marred by impunity, violence, corruption, and a civil society that remained weak--some of the enabling factors behind the rise of militant political Islam later on. As notions of 'nation building' and 'democracy promotion' reappear in the American lexicon today, and concepts of 'guided democracy' win supporters in the Beltway once again, this book reads like a useful warning.

There are two limitations to this book that need pointing out. The first one refers to the paucity with which it deals with Indonesia's foreign policy. Both Sukarno and Suharto were activist diplomats, and their choices played a major role in complicating relations with the United States. While the book is good on some of the regional aspects of this period, the reader misses a more thorough treatment of the prevailing foreign policy themes and tensions of that time.

The second limitation refers to data. There is little or no reference to Indonesian documents, newspapers, or interviews, making this a book more about US policy towards Indonesia than a study about the dynamic and fascinating interaction between the two countries. Also, while the claim that the United States and the USSR competed actively in Indonesia is well rooted in the established scholarly conversation about the topic, the absence of Soviet documents obscures the actual dynamics of competition as it played out within the author's overall framework. This may well be a problem of data availability. If so, an explanation...