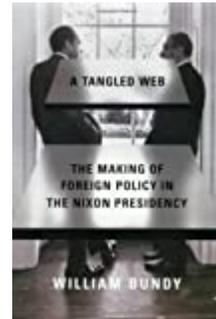




William Bundy. *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. xix + 647 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9151-5.



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Bundy on Nixon

William Bundy served four presidents in the last half century, but he chose to write about the one he only observed. This long, dense volume discusses at length the major foreign policy decisions of the Nixon White House from Richard Nixon's inauguration as president to his forced resignation.

The book is divided into ten chapters. Within those chapters, events are treated chronologically rather than by subject. This organization has advantages since it provides a certain clarity to the complexity of policy making. However, it has decided shortcomings for readers who wish to understand the evolution and completion of a particular Nixon-Kissinger policy, since this requires searching through the entire book. Richard Nixon had been a visible participant in public life for twenty years before reaching the presidency. In those years he had gained considerable experience in foreign affairs. Bundy probably magnifies his involvement in policy during his years as vice-president, but President Dwight D. Eisenhower did provide him with opportunities for global travel and participation in National Security Council (NSC) meetings. As a result, Nixon entered

office with strong opinions about world leaders and their countries. For example, as vice-president he was sympathetic to the Pakistani generals but shared John Foster Dulles' suspicions of Nehru's neutrality. His view of the world reflected his strong attacks on anti-communist liberals at home. His solution for the security of the United States was the "pactomania" preached by Dulles: mutual defense treaties from Turkey to Japan. (NATO took care of Western Europe). Many of his views did not change in the ensuing decade. He entered office determined to resist communism, convinced of the need to protect South Viet Nam and persuaded that the American Air Force could accomplish the task.

Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his National Security Adviser, set the agenda for foreign policy and formulated the policies. The secretary of state and his department were rarely consulted and often not even informed of decisions made in the Oval Office. Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, who was accustomed to long talks with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, was advised to bypass Secretary William Rogers and communicate only with Kissinger. With obvious disapproval, Bundy, who resigned as an as-

sistant secretary of state after the election of Nixon, notes that the use of “back-channel” communication networks set up within CIA facilities further isolated the State Department from policy-making.

Within the ten chronological chapters, Bundy discusses each major foreign policy issue faced by Nixon and Kissinger. In the Middle East, they were quickly faced with the aftermath of the 1968 war between Israel and her neighbors. Problems in Jordan escalated with the settlement there of large numbers of Palestinians and the fear of invasion from neighboring countries. Bundy also discusses Nixon’s 1972 unilateral decision to supply all of the arms requested by the Shah of Iran, in effect giving him “the keys to the store” (p. 330). This unlimited military support of Iran was one of Nixon’s most momentous policy decisions.

At the start of his administration, Nixon handled the Middle East since he felt that Kissinger’s Jewish background was a handicap in the region. But by the October War in 1973, the distracted president willingly turned to his national security adviser. Bundy, who is critical of Kissinger’s policies in other parts of the world, writes about his Middle East diplomacy during 1973-74 with admiration. The result of his “shuttle diplomacy,” Bundy concludes, was “an extraordinary performance, reflecting great diplomatic skill, enormous stamina,” and the capacity for gaining the confidence of the leaders on all sides of the quarrel over oil and Israeli aggression (p. 452).

On the other hand, Bundy regards U.S. policy toward the 1971 war between India and Pakistan as a fiasco. His emphasis on this conflict seems surprising, but it is justified in his mind because it illustrates the fundamental errors under which both Nixon and Kissinger operated. Both men misread the nations involved, including China. In his analysis of the Nixon-Kissinger “tilt” toward Pakistan, Bundy concludes that Kissinger’s moves reflected a balance-of-power policy rather than one to protect American interests. He states that no American policy can be based only on the balance-of-power and must take other factors into consideration. The resulting alliance with Pakistan was not in American interest, he concludes, because that nation was completely preoccupied by India. Of course, Kissinger made good use of his close relations with Pakistan, a point Bundy neglects in this interesting section of the book.

Bundy’s thorough approach to his subject includes coverage of Strategic Arms Control talks, the end of the Bretton Woods system, and relations with Willy Brandt.

His treatment of U.S. intervention in Chile provides some insight into William Bundy’s past. Although he is highly critical of Nixon for intervention in the 1970 Chilean election, he accepts the position that the U.S. had no involvement in the coup that placed General Pinochet in power. His view of CIA activities seems somewhat benign, perhaps reflecting his own lengthy career in that agency. Bundy, as might be expected, expends the greatest number of pages on Nixon’s Viet Nam policy and the opening of relations with China. It would be counterproductive to render a complete description of the negotiations that led to Nixon’s trip to China, or the painful years of “Vietnamization” and the widening of the war to Cambodia. Bundy seems to have no argument with Nixon’s announced program of negotiations, Vietnamization, and U.S. troop withdrawal. Two other aspects of the program that are often ignored, secret action in the surrounding countries and pressure on the USSR to push the North Vietnamese toward peace, are more problematic.

Cambodia was the “sinister theme” of Nixon’s policies toward Vietnam. Decisions to bomb the border area, the May 1970 incursion, the decision to supply continuing economic and military aid and, finally, the 1973 bombing of Cambodia produced unbelievably tragic consequences for the Cambodian people. It was clearly a mistaken policy by the summer of 1972 when the Khmer Rouge replaced North Vietnamese control. Bundy concedes that there were some military advantages to the defense of South Vietnam, but he discounts their importance. Cambodia, he concludes, was “Nixon’s War” (p. 498). It was the antithesis of the Vietnamization policy and American withdrawal which he promised in 1969.

The Tangled Web concludes with twenty pages in which Bundy presents his evaluation of the Nixon-Kissinger policy initiatives. Once again, he attacks the policy making process that shut out the professionals in the State Department. As a result, he writes, a balanced view of American interests was influenced by the personal experiences of the two men in charge: the views Nixon had propounded since the Eisenhower Administration, and the lessons Kissinger took from his study of European history. “Nixon and Kissinger,” he concludes, “steered by examples and stereotypes drawn from their own experiences” (p. 515).

Using Kissinger’s eulogy at the memorial service for Richard Nixon in April, 1994, as an outline, Bundy presents his devastating critique of Nixon’s policies. In response to Kissinger’s contention that Nixon concluded the war in Vietnam, he again notes the terrible effects of

the bombing and incursions into Cambodia. The opening of a “permanent dialogue” with China was as much an effect of the tensions between China and the Soviet Union as a result of U.S. initiatives. The dialogue weakened within three years as conditions improved. Bundy states that, in 1969, there was reason to believe the Soviet Union was on the verge of bombing the nuclear plants in China. He credits Nixon’s initiative with discouraging the Soviets and preventing the possibility of a dreadful conflagration. In the end, he gives both Nixon and Kissinger ample credit for their China policy.

The Middle East peace process that began with Kissinger and Nixon was a positive achievement, although even here, Bundy disapproves of policy decisions concerning the Middle East during the oil crisis. Bundy is not persuaded by Kissinger’s contention that Nixon was ready to ease tensions with the Soviet Union. His attempts to do so were based upon political judgements leading to the next election. Nor, in his mind, did Nixon ever escape from his 1950s view of third world countries. He always exaggerated the Soviet role and influence, and Bundy points to India and Chile as examples. To Bundy, Nixon was formed by his times and therefore was the “archetype, perhaps even the caricature, of the Cold Warrior” (p. 529).

Nixon’s policies, including detente, were rarely appreciated and often seriously weakened by the Congress. Bundy attributes this to the fact that his talents, however formidable, were tainted by his “unshakable bent to deceive” (p. 519). Deception, based on secrecy, was a way of thinking for Nixon, and he readily used it in his foreign policy. Bundy concludes his discussion with this indict-

ment of Nixon and Kissinger; they deceived Congress and the public so often that they seriously harmed the impact of their policy. “If there is a single lesson from the Nixon era that stands out above all others,” he writes, “it is that a pattern of deception, of Congress and of the American people, is in the end doomed to failure” (p. 529).

William Bundy spent fourteen years writing *The Tangled Web*. Based on secondary sources including the Nixon and Kissinger memoirs, it is both serious history and an indictment of the foreign policy team of Nixon-Kissinger. Obviously, Bundy, who disliked Nixon, was troubled by the flattering descriptions of the men and their policy. The book quickly drew Kissinger’s ire. In a response to a review of the book, Kissinger refuted Bundy’s criticisms and accused him of hypocrisy.[1] But his critique was wide of the mark because it failed to address the heart of Bundy’s argument: that in a democracy, a successful foreign policy cannot be built on a pattern of deception.

Note

[1]. See the review by Tony Judt, “Counsels on Foreign Relations,” in the *New York Review of Books*, August 13, 1998, pp. 54-61. Kissinger’s views can be found in September 24, 1998, pp. 78-80. William Bundy’s reply follows on October 8, 1998, p. 56.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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