



Jeffrey P. Kimball. *Nixon's Vietnam War.* Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998. 528 pages. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0924-6.

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Note: H-Diplo recently ran a roundtable in which they reviewed Jeffrey Kimball's *Nixon's Vietnam War*. The roundtable participants are Lloyd Gardner, David Kaiser, Edwin Moise, and Qiang Zhai.

Jeffrey Kimball has written a most ambitious and interesting book, one which supplants Seymour Hersh's *The Price of Power* as the most thorough study of Nixon and the Vietnam War. The title describes the book accurately: Nixon, not the war itself, is the focus of the story, and the book does not address many aspects – particularly military aspects – of the war from 1969 through 1972 in much depth. I find the author's interpretation of Nixon convincing in quite a few respects, although Kimball, like so many before him, has become so fascinated with his subject that he perhaps begins to take every one of his minor utterances too seriously. Let me comment, first, on the book itself, and then on some of the substantive issues about the war that it raises, as well as the work which is yet to be done.

Kimball argues, and I agree, that Nixon was a severely disturbed individual. To anyone who still doubts this I recommend a few hours with the Haldeman diaries, upon which Kimball relies a great deal. Nixon was obsessed with his image, his enemies, his indispensability, and his supposed historical role, to an extent unusual even among politicians. His self-image, moreover, was deeply

flawed – as Haldeman frequently showed and occasionally remarked, he was not even really a hard worker or a deep thinker, since his obsessions made it impossible for him to focus on any concrete issue for very long. Several generations of aides have argued that his outbursts shouldn't be taken seriously, but the record, alas, suggests that these protests tell us more about them than about him. Frequently, he meant it. Kimball is equally scathing about the main supporting player in his story, Henry Kissinger, calling Nixon "paranoid, moody, devious and insecure," and Kissinger "suspicious, brooding, devious, and insecure," not to mention obsequious, especially towards Nixon.

With respect to Vietnam, Nixon seems to have believed that by a mixture of force and threat he could actually secure American objectives. Kimball shows that Kissinger in particular may have adopted this view partly because of a RAND corporation study of possible outcomes and opinions within the government which was somewhat more optimistic than the bureaucracy's own NSSM-1, available for many years, which concluded that the United States could not assure a South Vietnam that could defend itself without continuing American help within the foreseeable future. Nixon believed in a mixture of help from the Soviets, Vietnamization, and the "madman theory" – the idea that the North Vietnamese

would make concessions out of the fear of what he might do, including the use of nuclear weapons. Drawing on some new sources, Kimball makes a persuasive case that Nixon believed in such a theory, and tried to make use of it. He also has secured the partial release of a September 18, 1971 options paper from Kissinger to Nixon in which one entire option has been blacked out. Based upon my own experience, the odds are good that the blacked-out portion has something to do with nuclear weapons. I hope he has appealed the deletion.

Both at the time and in their memoirs, Nixon and Kissinger always liked to believe they were in control of events and would eventually bring them to a satisfactory conclusion. Yet what I found most fascinating about Kimball's lengthy narrative is the extent to which, again and again, they found themselves constrained by the very factors – public opinion, student demonstrations, international pressure, and the Congress – which they prided themselves upon ignoring. Nowhere was this truer than in November 1969, when Nixon, while proclaiming publicly that the moratorium demonstrations would have no effect upon him, shelved plans for drastic escalation against the North because he feared the effect that it might have. Kimball does not spend much time on another important motive of Nixon's. The President, it is clear from Haldeman's diaries, had concluded by 1970 that the demonstrations provoked by the continuing war were an asset, since they angered the older Silent majority on whom he was relying for support.

Much of the book deals with the protracted talks between Kissinger and the North Vietnamese, and in this case, I think, the clarity of the presentation suffers somewhat from the author's focus on the perspective of the two American leaders, who tried to avoid the critical issues in the talks for as long as they could. The big issue in the talks, which the North Vietnamese had stressed since announcing their Four Points in 1965, was the political future of South Vietnam, and Nixon and Kissinger, for as long as they could, stuck to the idea of Thieu's government as a fully sovereign entity whose status could not change. In mid-September 1972, Kissinger finally agreed to North Vietnamese language which put the Saigon government and the NLF and its Provisional Revolutionary government on an equal footing within South Vietnam, while the Communists dropped their demand that Thieu resign. Yet perhaps because the documentary record remains incomplete, it is not altogether clear from Kimball's text (pp. 333-5) exactly how this agreement was reached, much less how Nixon, who I do not think ever acknowledged this critical aspect of what Kissinger had

negotiated, came to accept it. Thieu, of course, initially refused to accept it. Nor is there any explanation here of when, and how, the United States agreed to the first and most striking provision of the Paris accords – our acceptance of the “unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity” of Vietnam as a whole.

The most thoroughly documented part of Kimball's book is his account of the critical months of October, November, December and January 1972-3, including the Christmas bombing. They leave no doubt whatever that that bombing, while it gave Nixon and Kissinger the excuse to claim that they had coerced the enemy into “peace with honor” and probably helped convince Thieu to sign on, extracted no new concessions of any significance from the Communist negotiators. It was the US, partly but not exclusively on Saigon's behalf, which asked for important changes in principle to the agreement that had been negotiated in early October. The North Vietnamese only raised new demands of their own in return, and after the Christmas bombing ceased, both sides went back to the previous agreement with only very minor changes. Yet Nixon and Kissinger have continued to propagate the myth that Nixon conceived at the time, and several debates on this list show that new generations of supporters are keeping their view alive nearly thirty years later.

In a sense, it seems to me, denial is the real theme of this book –specifically Nixon and Kissinger's denial of the obstacles to achieving their objectives, which seems to have led Nixon at least to deceive even himself about what he had agreed to. Personally I believe that Kissinger, whatever else he may have done, deserves some credit for negotiating the settlement on a modified version of Hanoi's terms and leaving Nixon in a position where he really had no choice, after sending the B-52s over Hanoi (and losing 15 of them), but to accept them. Indeed, some of Kimball's earlier discussions of nuclear weapons suggest that various administrations practiced a form of denial about those weapons, convincing themselves that they could somehow make use of them, all the more so since, under Eisenhower, they had become the foundation of our defense. Nixon's denial was nearly as impressive as Ronald Reagan's, as revealed in Frances Fitzgerald's new book about Star Wars, and to my surprise, Kimball shows that Nixon was nearly as concerned with performance, as opposed to substance, as Reagan was.

The extent of Nixon and Kissinger's denial could be better documented, I think, by a more extended treatment of what was happening politically and militarily

within South Vietnam during these years. This presents formidable documentary problems – even Lewis Sorley’s recent book on General Abrams is based largely on reminiscences – but to judge by what I have found about the early sixties, some researcher eventually will discover that better information was available to the authorities in Washington had they paid any attention to it, and that they chose instead to ignore it. Nixon and Kissinger go around and around in circles for much of this book; I would like to have seen their gymnastics balanced by

more real data. They tried—with some success—to define the nature of the problem and the solution they reached at the time. We shouldn’t allow them to define the parameters of the histories that can be written now, even if we treat them critically.

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