H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

Reviewed by Lloyd C. Gardner (Rutgers University)
Published on H-Diplo (May, 2000)

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

NOT MAD ENOUGH?

Jeff Kimball's detailed account of what he calls "Nixinger" diplomacy offers historians a strong contrast to the spate of books and articles recently published arguing that we really did win the Vietnam War if only liberals in Congress and the media had not lost their nerve and forced an abandonment of our long-suffering allies on the frontiers of freedom in South Vietnam. From the time of the ill-advised 1962 Laos agreement, through the coup against Diem, on into the agonizingly mistaken Johnson strategy of gradual escalation, it is being argued, the war was waged as much against Saigon as it was against the VC/NV enemy. Kimball takes the position that those who see Nixon and Kissinger as would-be redeemers need to re-examine the evidence. *Nixon's Vietnam War* is as exhaustively researched as was possible, given the constant new outpourings of evidence from various archives around the world. (It should be noted in passing that Jeff has continued his research even after publication of his book, and has presented selections from his new findings on H-Diplo from time to time.) One of his most valuable sources, nevertheless, turns out to be, as more than one reviewer noted, *The Haldeman Diaries*, available in two forms, a book published by Putnam in 1994, and the far more valuable CD-ROM put out by Sony that same year. Unfortunately, finding a readable copy of the CD is fairly difficult, as it seems quite put off by advances in computer technology. Haldeman's observations on Nixon and Kissinger, and on the war they were waging, provide an unmatched record of the White House mood, as it shifted from week-to-week, and, sometimes, from day-to-day. The entries provide material for at least a dozen psycho-historians.

But putting Nixon (and Kissinger) on the couch is not Kimball's main purpose. It is startling to recall that Richard Nixon played more roles in the Vietnam War over a longer period of time than did any other policy-maker. Sent by Eisenhower on a fact-finding trip through Asia late in the first year of that president's administration, the then vice-president came back to provide a gloomy report on the French effort to defeat the insurgents. What happened in the next few years, he reported, did not necessarily mean a lasting victory – no matter how well the French might improve their capacities. We could not risk a new war with China, or pursue rapprochement. The only answer, therefore, was to build up Vietnamese strength and "leadership." Interestingly, also (although Kimball does not mention this), Nixon recommended that Washington stop criticizing its allies for trading with Communist China. Such a move should quiet European criticism, and give the Chinese a stake in what he would later call the "structure of peace." Here was the essence of Vietnamization already fully imagined in Nixon's global thinking.

On the other hand, and as Kimball explains at length, the madman theory first occurred to Nixon at about the same time. It grew out of the murky evidence that Eisenhower had threatened to use the a-bomb to end the Korean War if the truce negotiations did not bring about a truce, and the somewhat firmer evidence that – for a brief moment at least – consideration was given to relieving the besieged French bastion at Dienbienphu. Eschewing all the learned debate historians have engaged in over matter of atomic diplomacy in the early years of the Cold War, Nixon told "Time" magazine in 1985 that the bomb had made the United States the "most powerful nation in the world," and because it possessed such atomic superiority, he said, "the U.S. started using the Bomb as a diplomatic stick." (p. 21) By the time he came into the presidency, of course, the U.S. possessed no such clear-cut superiority. But, he believed, there was still much to gain from appearing to be irrational, out of control, frustrated, what have you – as a way of intimidating the other side. Kimball sees this as a constant attitude from 1969 to the Christmas Bombings of 1972. Unlike some

psycho-historians who have left Nixon to wander lonely and feeling misunderstood nearly all his life, Kimball portrays a man perfectly rational in his choices, whose vision of "credibility" as the foundation of global order took him down some risky paths, but who could never be accused of a lack of a method in his "madness." Perhaps that was the trouble: he was not mad enough, and everyone knew it.

For a long time in the Johnson Administration, Averell Harriman had argued the case for trying to solve the Vietnam War by going through Moscow. Neither he nor anyone later in the Nixon Administration was able to use the Russians directly to bring about an end to the fighting. But what Harriman also said was that the negotiations should be divided into military and political tracks. The U.S. would deal with the North Vietnamese about the military track, and the political track should be left to the contending forces in South Vietnam. As Kimball picks up the story, the U.S. position was still the same – except that it was now realized that the question of which came first was crucial to both sides. Harriman had little patience with South Vietnamese complaints that they were being abandoned; in the end, so did Kissinger and Nixon. At each step of the path out of Vietnam, Nixon paused to issue yet another threat of dire consequences if Hanoi did not come to terms. Instead of a madman, he began to resemble the little boy who cried wolf.

Kissinger himself recounted that at an early meeting with Le Duc Tho, the latter responded to one of these threats by questioning how America, if it could not win the war with half-a-million troops of its own, could expect to win with a puppet army? Kimball marvels at the various public and private statements that Nixon made about ending the war within a year of his coming into the presidency. "For a self-styled realist, his comment[s] uncovered a naive and arrogant assumption: the possibility of ending on his terms in less than one year a war that had been going on for decades, and one that the United States, by the account of most experts, was losing. Such a view of the world's malleability was more presumptuous than realistic." (p. 101.) As that year dwindled down, nevertheless, Nixon devised a massive strike plan code-named Duck Hook, only to abandon it out of fear of domestic political consequences, and, perhaps, out of concern for losing a chance to negotiate a favorable arms agreement with the Russians.

Instead, to provide himself with political cover for carrying on a longer war, Nixon promoted the POW issue. In doing so, alas, he inadvertently handed the North Vietnamese a special bargaining chip that they could play at a time best suited to win some advantage for their side. Perhaps South Vietnamese President Thieu best understood what had happened, for he questioned Kissinger closely about whether or not if Hanoi offered a simple cease fire and prisoner exchange the United States would agree to a halt in the fighting. Kissinger said that such a scenario was hardly likely, but yes, he had to confess, Nixon had said he would accept that offer. Thieu's probing, however, was not designed to turn up a response to that exact question, for he, too, believed such an offer was unlikely. What he discovered from the colloquy was that Nixon's commitment to a satisfactory political solution, from his point of view, was soft.

Alternating between despondency about the lack of backbone Americans were showing the world, as reflected in the counter-culture in all its variants, and buoyance about the supposed successes of Vietnamization, Kissinger told H.R. Haldeman that it would take only one more dry season to win the war. Haldeman was skeptical. "This is, of course, the same line he's used for the last two years, over and over, and I guess what all of Johnson's advisors used with him, to keep he thing escalating . . . . It sounds like a broken record." (p. 277.)

Kimball suggests that the climactic peace negotiations from September, 1972 through early January to the signing of an agreement, did reflect a stalemate on the ground. War weariness affected both sides; but of the engaged parties, the South Vietnamese regime had the most to lose from any settlement on those terms – for it would (and did) reflect the inability of the Saigon military to remove VC/NV forces from large areas below the DMZ. The Christmas bombings did not alter that situation. In retrospect, Kimball concludes, the Nixinger case that the war had been won were it not for a last minute failure of will, has been built upon a lengthy series of "ifs," none of which were real alternatives at the time. The final 1975 offensive that ended the war, he argues, was more predetermined by four years of false promises, than it was by Gerald Ford's failure to get Congress to pony up yet one more time. Because he had placed too much faith in his own ability to bluff through with the madman ploy, and because he thought he could cantilever Russia and China into irresistible pressure on Hanoi, Nixon prolonged the war – and wound up, as he would put it in a post-presidential interview with David Frost, "the last casualty in Vietnam."

In his comments, Edwin Moise develops the criticism that, from one point of view at least, Nixon was not mad enough, while perhaps even fooling himself into be-

lieving that he was. Moise wonders about the absence of commentary in Kimball's book on the actual state of the ground war, noting that in the case of the battle for "Hamburger Hill" in mid-May of 1969, a battle that despite its relative small loss of American lives, inspired a strong outburst of antiwar sentiment at home. What bothered people the most was the seeming senselessness of the kind of war still being fought, despite the supposed change in tactics in General Creighton Abrams "better war." Neither Kissinger nor Nixon give it much attention in their memoirs, although the president ordered the sort of operation that produced the battle of "Hamburger Hill" not to be repeated. He wanted casualties held down – meaning American casualties. As for the Christmas bombing, it was nowhere as devastating as what happened to enemy cities in World War II or Korea. Hence the question: What audience did he most want to hear the noise of bombs falling?

Qiang Zhai suggests that not enough material has become available from North Vietnamese archives to settle several questions about Hanoi's decision-making process. Even so, it has become clear that North Vietnam never had any illusions about Cambodia's neutrality after Sihanouk's fall. More important, he questions historical treatments of the so-called split amongst China's policymakers over the opening to America between Lin Biao, and his followers, versus Mao and Zhou. No document has surfaced, he observes, that confirms such a split. Rather, the hiatus in rapprochement stemmed from international developments, especially the invasion of Cambodia.

David Kaiser also takes note of Nixon's self-delusion about being in control of events, while at the same instant almost backing away from a too risky demonstration of madness. Kaiser raises some very important questions about how the negotiations actually got to the point they did by mid-September of 1972. What did Nixon actually approve of (or know about) crucial elements in the proposed settlement? Like Ed Moise, Kaiser suggests that the Christmas Bombing has taken on a mythological and suggestive importance that continues to show up in otherwise sober accounts of the war. But Kaiser reflects upon the role they made have played at the time in providing Kissinger with the final arguments to lever the president into tight spot, with no way out but to accept the terms his super-envoy had negotiated. Kaiser ends with a plea to historians not to accept the myth-ed history being offered, but to keep after the evidence of what they knew when they knew it.

In 1966, Nixon had sharply questioned LBJ's offer to withdraw American troops six months after a cession of hostilities, pointing out that such a commitment would leave him without effective options should the war resume. Seven years later no politician was ready to offer such a criticism of the Paris agreement signed on January 27, 1973, which called for a much earlier cut off date. Dean Rusk had insisted that if the VC were allowed to shoot their way into power, the war had been for nought. Seven years later, the Paris agreement sanctioned the existence of two governments in South Vietnam, and allowed North Vietnamese troops to remain behind to protect territory detached from Saigon's rule. The POWs came home to a lavish welcome at the White House, which, as Senator Aiken had suggested it should years earlier, declared a victory. Those were seven years that tried men's souls, presented in Jeff Kimball's eerily non-emotional prose – and all the more powerful for that.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Lloyd C. Gardner. Review of Kimball, Jeffrey P., *Nixon's Vietnam War.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4100

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.