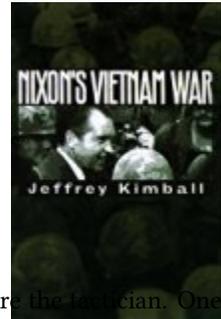


H-Net Reviews

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 Qiang Zhai (Auburn University at Montgomery)
Published on H-Diplo (May, 2000)



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's prodigious research has uncovered a wealth of new material on Nixon's handling of the Vietnam War. He has done extensive investigation in American archives, especially the recently available Nixon Presidential Materials. He has also consulted some Vietnamese documents and conducted interviews with former North Vietnamese officials. Furthermore, he has incorporated new Russian documents published in the Cold War International History Project Bulletin. The result is a well-researched and clearly-written account of Nixon's war in Vietnam.

At the outset, Kimball claims that he "hoped to make sense of the policies of very complex and secretive men, namely, Nixon, Kissinger, and the members of the Hanoi Politburo." In the end, he succeeds more in accounting for Nixon's calculations than in explaining North Vietnamese deliberations. Indeed, Kimball is at his best in explaining policymaking in Washington. He has a fine sense of the domestic and international context within which Nixon's Vietnam policy was formulated. His treatment of Nixon's triangular diplomacy is particularly deft.

Kimball also pays close attention to the manner in which Nixon's personality affected his conduct of the war in Vietnam. He is penetrating in peeling the Nixonian onion of its layers of self-righteousness and self-deception. He argues that the madman theory was the key element in Nixon's Vietnam strategy and that it was even more important than Vietnamization and triangular diplomacy. Regarding the relationship between Nixon and Kissinger, Kimball contends that Nixon was more

the strategist and Kissinger was more the politician. One comes away from reading the book with a better understanding of the way the Nixon-Kissinger team worked.

Lack of access to Vietnamese archives, however, has handicapped Kimball's efforts to solve the mystery of policymaking in Hanoi. It is still unclear how decisions were made in North Vietnam and whether there were policy divisions within the Politburo. Some of Kimball's statements about Hanoi's policy are open to question. For instance, he writes that Hanoi "did not immediately embrace Sihanouk after the coup and continued for a time to press for a diplomatic compromise with Lon Nol, hoping that he would adopt the neutral stance of his predecessor and accept the existence of the sanctuaries in Cambodian territory" (pp. 199-200). But new documents obtained by the Cold War International History Project indicate that the Hanoi leadership had no illusions about negotiations with Lon Nol. Pham Van Dong told Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai three days after the coup that negotiations with the Lon Nol regime "would not bring about any results, because they would eventually fight against us" (CWIHP Working Paper No. 22, pp. 160-162).

While Kimball's discussion of Chinese policy is generally accurate, his explanation of policy change in Beijing in 1970 lacks substantiation. In explaining the delay in the progress of the Sino-American opening in 1970, Kimball lists three reasons: policy divisions within China, Nixon's tactic of secret diplomacy, and the Cambodian invasion (p. 261). Kimball does not elaborate on the so-called "policy divisions within China." Presumably he is referring to the opposition of Defense Minister Lin Biao and his supporters to Mao and Zhou Enlai's efforts to reach out to the Americans. Kissinger was the first to speculate about the effects of a power struggle

between the moderates led by Zhou Enlai and the radicals associated with the military on China's Vietnam policy (Kissinger, "White House Years," pp. 696-697). Since then, the idea that Lin Biao opposed China's opening to the United States has been continuously recycled in Western writings on Chinese policy during this period. The most recent example is James Mann's "About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton" (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, p. 26). In fact, however, no Chinese document has surfaced to confirm the hypothesis that Lin Biao opposed improving relations with the United States. All the available Chinese documents indicate that Mao and Zhou Enlai dominated Beijing's policy toward Washing-

ton and that Lin Biao's role was minimal. The primary reason for the interruption of the Sino-American rapprochement in 1970 was rooted in international developments, especially the U.S. invasion of Cambodia.

These musings do not detract from the value of the book, which remains an important contribution to the study of Nixon's foreign policy. Kimball has carved out a special niche for himself in the literature of the Vietnam War.

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