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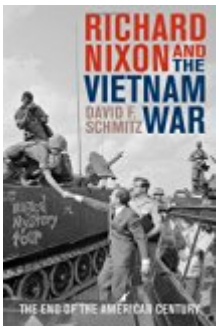
David F. Schmitz. *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century.* Vietnam: America in the War Years Series. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 186 pp. $38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4422-2709-5.



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David F. Schmitz, Skotheim Chair of History at Whitman College and author of several books on U.S. foreign relations, begins his history of Richard Nixon's views about and management of the U.S. war in Vietnam with Nixon's vice presidency in the 1950s. He continues through Nixon's office-seeking years during the 1960s, and concludes with his conduct of the war as president from January 1969 to his resignation in August 1974. The author's main thesis is that the exit of U.S. forces from Cambodia in June 30, 1970, initiated a "distinct" transition from Nixon's initial madman strategy to a quite different strategy by mid-1971. The purpose of the madman theory, Schmitz stipulates, had been to achieve a "victory on the battlefield" (p. xv); but the new strategy consisted in the "de-escalation of American forces and maintenance of the Saigon government intact until after his reelection" (p. xiv). "The year 1970," he concludes, "was to Nixon's Vietnam policy what 1968 had been to [Lyndon B.] Johnson's, and Cambodia was his Tet Offensive" (p. 104).[1]

This shift from a strategy of seeking "military victory" to one of de-Americanization and Vietnamization, Schmitz maintains, had become American strategy "by default" (p. 102); that is, it had been made necessary by the failure of Nixon's madman strategy and the absence of a viable alternative. The author suggests that his discovery of this strategy shift warrants "a new periodization of the war" (p. xv). Apparently because of the importance he places on this supposedly distinct shift, the author's focus is on the years 1953 to 1971—from Nixon's vice presidency to the U.S.-supported South Vietnamese invasion of Laos from February into April 1971. The critical period from that 1971 date to late January 1973 and the signing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace receives much less attention, approximately thirteen pages, less than 10 percent of the book.

Schmitz concludes that in the end Nixon was unable to fulfill his "plan" to "support and supply Saigon and to employ airpower to protect" South Vietnamese armed forces from Viet Cong and

North Vietnamese (VC/NVA) forces, because the legal and political fallout from the Watergate break-in forced the president from office (p. 143). He also emphasizes two other themes: Nixon's war in Vietnam can only be properly understood within a Cold War context; and Nixon's default Vietnamization strategy signified "the end of the American Century" (p. 109). It did so because "the U.S. military could achieve only a stalemate in Vietnam, thus leading to a defeat for its policy of limited war to contain communism," which was also accompanied by internal division within the United States, Americans' loss of "optimism and confidence," and U.S. economic decline after the most "turbulent and divisive moment" of the United States in the twentieth century (pp. 110, 41).

Schmitz's proposed "new" periodization of Nixonian strategy and his discussion of the madman theory are problematic. Nixon, Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, and some journalists and historians have previously written about the transition in U.S. strategy from one of trying to force an early end to the war on U.S. terms by some point in 1970 to a "long-route" strategy emphasizing de-Americanization and Vietnamization.[2] Furthermore, both major options—the short-route and the long-route strategies—were present in Nixon and Kissinger's overall game plan from the start of the administration in late January 1969. As time passed, the detailed components of the game plan were filled in. It evolved in response to the circumstances of the war, the political climate on the homefront, the actions of Hanoi and the National Liberation Front at the negotiating table and on the field of battle, Moscow's response to Washington's carrot-and-stick diplomacy, and internal debates within the administration.

Nixon's madman theory was indeed an important element in the overall strategy, but Schmitz is incorrect in suggesting that the purpose of the madman strategy was designed to achieve "military victory" or a "victory on the battlefield." The extant recollections of aides and the documentary record clearly demonstrate that after Tet 1968, Nixon understood that a military victory was not in the cards. When, for example, Nixon received reports in late March 1968 about President Johnson's recent meeting with his Wise Men, he confided to his campaign speech writers that "there's no way to win the war." By this he meant that there was no way to defeat the other side militarily. Yet, like Johnson's Wise Men, he continued to hope for a successful political outcome, and to this end, he needed "bargaining leverage" to conclude the war "promptly on a basis consistent with the strategic interests of the United States and the free Asian nations."[3] Another example: while talking to Kissinger about President Nguyen Van Thieu's suggested revisions of the semifinal draft of a speech that Nixon was scheduled to deliver on May 14, 1969, he said: "In Saigon the tendency is to fight the war to victory. It has to be kept in mind, but you and I know it won't happen—it is impossible. Even Gen. Abrams agreed."[4]

The madman theory was not about military victory but about coercing one's opponent to comply with one's demands—in this case, attempting to coerce the Politburo in Hanoi to accept the Nixon administration's terms at the negotiating table by threatening to unleash sudden and excessive force against North Vietnam should the Politburo fail to comply. The administration delivered such threats via public statements; secret diplomatic channels; third parties; direct messages to Hanoi; and escalated military operations, including the expansion of bombing in Laos and the bombing of VC/NVA base areas along the Cambodian border. For Nixon and Kissinger, extraordinary military measures not only had military purposes but also were intended to signal the president's "mad" willingness to do the unexpected and the possibility of his spinning "out of control."[5] When coupled with implicit threats of nuclear force, the madman theory was similar to the brinkmanship of former President Dwight Eisen-

hower and his secretary of state John Foster Dulles, Nixon's foreign policy mentors.

Moreover, Nixon and Kissinger were not seeking a political victory; or at least they understood that such a victory was unlikely or impossible. Schmitz does at some level, I think, understand this. On at least two occasions, he implies or hints that the military force Nixon and Kissinger deployed or threatened to launch was primarily intended to keep Thieu's government in power until at least the end of 1972 or for a finite period after Nixon's reelection (pp. xiv, 110-111). In other words, its purpose was not to bring about and ensure a real military or political "victory": the defeat of VC/NVA armed forces and the establishment of a permanently independent South Vietnam. But the author's frequent use of the term "military victory" and the absence of a substantive analysis of the kind of war ending that Nixon and Kissinger actually sought and planned for creates the impression that by "military victory" the author means military victory.

As for strategic periodization, the most likely date for a major alteration in administration strategy was not during the period after the U.S. exit from Cambodia in June 1970 but rather during and after the weeks from early October into November 1969, when Nixon aborted the planning and implementation of his long-threatened mining-and-bombing assault against North Vietnam, a plan often referred to in the historical literature as DUCK HOOK. This prospective operation had been tentatively scheduled to begin in early November should Hanoi fail to meet Nixon's November 1 deadline for yielding to his threats and accepting his negotiating demands. In his televised speech to the nation on November 3—an address that was originally intended to announce the commencement of DUCK HOOK—President Nixon not only appealed to the "silent majority" for support, criticized opponents of the war, and castigated North Vietnam's belligerence, but also touted his own efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement while highlighting his program of gradually and unilaterally withdrawing U.S. troops, coupled with Vietnamization.

In the days and weeks that followed, and well before the invasion of Cambodia at the end of April 1970, he and Kissinger began the transition to the long-route strategy. The invasion was mainly an effort to protect Vietnamization ***and*** the long-route withdrawal strategy—not by achieving a military victory, as Schmitz elsewhere suggests, but, as he also acknowledges here and there (e.g., pp. 88 and 91), setting back possible VC/NVA efforts to launch offensives into South Vietnam in the near future. The invasion of Cambodia was not, however, a failure in the sense Schmitz claims, and it was not equivalent to the impact of Tet 1968 on President Johnson, Congress, and the U.S. public.[6] In addition, it was not the defining moment in Nixon's Vietnam War or the end of the "the American Century."[7]

De-Americanization and Vietnamization were default strategies only in the sense that DUCK HOOK, the centerpiece of the short-route strategy, had been abandoned by Nixon in the face of several considerations: negative analyses of its potential for success by Laird, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and several of Kissinger's own staff; Hanoi's resistance to his threats; Soviet noncooperation with Washington; and Nixon's concerns about his ability to hold the government and nation together for the six months or more projected for the operation to succeed (assuming it could succeed). The alternative long-route strategy was not a default strategy in the sense of Nixon having been forced by circumstances to withdraw in a haphazard, unplanned manner. It was an alternate strategy of choice. There was a method, purpose, and timetable associated with the withdrawal, as Schmitz acknowledges in several places. On the advice of Kissinger, Nixon's stretch-out of U.S. troop withdrawals was keyed to the 1972 U.S. presidential election and the signing of a suitable negotiated settlement. At the same time, Nixon

and Kissinger continued to apply military force ***and*** the madman stratagem to achieve their ends. During the next three years, for example, their mad signaling included "protective reaction" strikes in southern North Vietnam and the LINEBACKER II operation in December 1972; Nixon also issued madman threats in relation to other events—for example, the Jordanian crisis of September 1970.

In addition to emphasizing U.S. troop withdrawals and Vietnamization, Nixon and Kissinger stepped up their efforts to extend the carrots of détente to the Soviet Union and foster rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, in part to enlist their assistance in persuading Hanoi to compromise on Washington's negotiation terms. Although the author makes much of placing Nixon's Vietnam War within a Cold War context, he gives little attention to the Great Power game Nixon and Kissinger were trying to play, which included such tactics as not only détente and rapprochement but also triangular diplomacy and linkage. Nor does he define the nature of the Cold War or its evolution from Nixon's early encounter with it in the 1940s and 1950s compared to his perceptions in the 1960s and 1970s, by which time Moscow and Beijing were engaged in a bitter feud and the Soviets had achieved nuclear parity with the United States. Was the Cold War merely a Great Power struggle based mainly on considerations of the "balance of power" and generalized "national interest" or was it also cultural and economic in nature? Were Nixon's concerns about the fate of South Vietnam only about falling dominos, "commitment," and "credibility" or also about perceived threats of anticapitalist revolution to U.S. hegemony? These Cold War issues are not discussed.

In telling his story, Schmitz draws mainly on newspapers, Nixon's ***Public Papers,*** and U.S. documents in volumes 6 and 7 of the ***Foreign Relations of the United States*** (***FRUS***) about the Nixon administration's handling of the Vietnam War, with four additional citations from volume 9. These three volumes were published between 2006 and 2010 and include U.S. records for the periods January 1969 to January 1972 and October 1972 to January 1973. The author points out in his introduction that they contain "the most recently declassified documents" (p. xv). But a qualification should be added: they contain only ***some*** of the most recently declassified documents. ***FRUS*** volumes are convenient, indispensable, and much appreciated. Unavoidably, however, ***FRUS*** editors must make decisions about what documents or portions of documents to include or exclude—decisions with which other editors and historians may disagree. The key issue for historians is the relationship between their own research needs and these editorial choices.

Also missing from Schmitz's sources are other important and relevant volumes published by the Historian's Office; for example, Vietnam War ***FRUS*** volume 8, which covers, even if partially, the crucial months of January 1972 through the first week of October 1972; ***FRUS*** volumes 12, 13, 14, 17, and 19 in the Nixon series having to do with the Soviet Union, China, and National Security Policy (2006-11); and ***Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972*** (2007), which includes both USSR and U.S. transcripts of conversations between Anatoly Dobrynin and Kissinger. All of these sources reproduce documents that have a critically important bearing on Nixon administration policy and strategy toward the Vietnam War. Other omissions from Schmitz's citations include English-language histories and documentary collections concerning the Vietnamese. In addition, there are many still-valuable and informative memoirs, biographies, and histories about all sides in the conflict that are not cited at all or not often enough; they include information, analyses, interpretations, perspectives, anecdotes, interviews, and conjectures unavailable in raw documentary collections.

Imposed brevity may be the reason that some source citations are absent and why Schmitz's narrative is truncated for the period after mid-1971. His volume is one in the Rowman & Littlefield series on the Cold War span from the mid-1950s to mid-1970s—a series that by design consists in "brief and engaging volumes" (frontispiece). Even considering that, Schmitz might have chosen to compress the first two chapters about Nixon's pre-presidential years (1953 to 1968)—perhaps cutting back, for example, on quotations from Nixon's public speeches—in order to more fully or adequately deal with the second half of 1971 and the crucial months of 1972 into 1973.

Furthermore, important events and issues for the years 1969 to 1973—aside from détente and rapprochement—receive scant mention or go missing altogether. Among these are the original July 1969 DUCK HOOK plan for mining Haiphong; the nuclear alert of October 1969 and its relationship to the mining-and-bombing concept plan known as DUCK HOOK; and PRUNING KNIFE, the Joint Chiefs' alternate concept to DUCK HOOK. Also receiving little attention are the 1972 LINEBACKER operations, the crucial U.S. negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam during the last months of the war, and an analysis of the Nixon-Kissinger relationship.

I would be remiss if I did not point out that there is also no specific mention in his narrative of Nixon and Kissinger's decent chance/decent interval exit strategy, with the exception of one reference on page 146, where the author comments on two of my books. This despite the author's argument in one or two places that Nixon's post-1970 default strategy became one of keeping Thieu in power until the 1972 U.S. presidential election. He also quotes a 1971 public speech by Nixon in which the president said: "The issue is ... this: Shall we leave Vietnam in a way that—by our own actions—consciously turns the country over to the Communists? Or shall we leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive as a free people?" (p. 121).

Giving Thieu a "reasonable chance" was quite different from preserving him in power indefinitely. Kissinger, for example, told Dobrynin in April 1969: "We are not committing ourselves to preserve the present Saigon administration forever," but a negotiated agreement should stipulate that South Vietnam would be "a separate and independent" entity "for at least five years." To Haig, Nixon said on October 3, 1972: "Call it cosmetics or whatever you want. This has got to be done in a way that will give South Vietnam a chance to survive. It doesn't have to survive forever. It's got to survive for a reasonable time. Then everybody can say 'goddamn, we did our part.'" By 1972, three years after Kissinger's comment to Dobrynin, the prospective interval had shrunk to one or two years. In an Oval Office conversation between Nixon and Kissinger on August 3, 1972, Kissinger reminded the president of the value of holding "the thing together a year or two."[8] These are just a few of the many documented statements recorded on tape or in state papers made by Nixon and Kissinger about the decent interval strategy but not addressed or explored in this book.

The decent interval thesis also helps explain the apparently paradoxical strategy that Nixon and Kissinger pursued and that Schmitz believes was indeed contradictory: combining madman threats and military force with troop withdrawals, yet placing a political and policy emphasis on maintaining U.S. credibility in support of allies. The decent interval solution was designed to preserve the appearance of Nixon's credibility despite his having withdrawn from South Vietnam while leaving Northern forces in the South and acknowledging the Provisional Revolutionary Government's political authority in the territory it occupied or controlled. Such credibility was achieved not only by the passage of an interval of a little over two years before Thieu's fall but also

by Nixon, Kissinger, and the political Right's narrative of portraying the 1973 cease-fire-in-place agreement as a victory and of blaming others for the fall of Saigon in 1975; namely, the antiwar movement, the press, and Congress.[9]

Concerning the role of Congress in the fall of Saigon, there is, however, no credible evidence to my knowledge that its supposed paucity of support for Saigon or its pursuit of the Watergate investigation had any impact on the fate of Saigon or that Nixon had an actual "plan" to reenter the fray in the event of a North Vietnamese invasion of the South. To a large extent, the proof is in the pudding: neither President Gerald Ford nor Secretary of State Kissinger resumed the bombing of NVA forces in 1974 or 1975 or seriously considered doing so. Nor is there any evidence that Nixon would have done so had the Watergate investigation not been carried out or had he retained the presidency; and there is no way of demonstrating that such bombing could have changed the outcome.

Schmitz's book has some good and useful passages in the first two chapters about Nixon's views on the war before he became president, and with a few important revisions, this volume could serve as a convenient summary account of Nixon's role in the Vietnam War. But as an interpretation of Nixon's Vietnam strategies and policies, it raises more questions than it answers.

Notes

[1]. Schmitz often uses the word "policy" for what I and perhaps others would consider to be "strategy" and "tactics." "Policy," I think, should refer mostly to state goals, while the military, diplomatic, and political methods and means with which state actors attempt to achieve their goals constitute their strategy. It seems to me, for example, that Vietnamization and the threat or actual escalation of military force were ***strategies*** aimed at achieving the administration's ***policy goals*** in Indochina—viz., exiting with "honor" while preserving "credibility" and winning reelection in 1972 (a political goal). Thus Nixon's policy aim of exiting Indochina with honor and credibility came down to giving Nguyen Van Thieu a chance to survive for a decent interval after the U.S. exit; whereas his military and diplomatic strategy vis-à-vis Hanoi, Moscow, and Beijing to achieve this goal—offering carrots and brandishing sticks, for example—constituted his and Henry Kissinger's strategy. It is perhaps a fine point but one that, I think, facilitates understanding.

[2]. Among works by historians that discuss the transition in strategy are my books ***Nixon's Vietnam War*** (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998) and ***Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Sceret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*** (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), as well as a number of anthology chapters, journal articles, and reviews published before and after these books. In all of these publications (and with increasing reliance on recently declassified documents and tapes and a better understanding of this history), I discuss the evolution and transition of Nixon and Kissinger's strategy from one initially placing more emphasis on a madman strategy than on Vietnamization to one after November 1969 of placing increasing emphasis on a strategy that included prolonged U.S. force withdrawals timed to the 1972 election, Vietnamization, triangular diplomacy, and the decent interval solution —but without dismissing military force and madman ploys. Schmitz kindly mentions my books in his conclusion and somewhat accurately describes my thesis but states that his account represents a "richer understanding" (p. 146).

[3]. Nixon quoted in Richard J. Whalen, ***Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), 26.

[4]. Telcon transcript, Nixon and Kissinger, 11:30 p.m., May 12, 1969, Henry A. Kissinger Telcons, Richard Nixon Presidential Library (RNPL). At the Nixon-Thieu meeting on Midway on June 8, 1969, Thieu conceded—rhetorically at least—that "neither side can win militarily"; MemCon, Nixon,

Thieu, Kissinger, Nguyen Phu Duc, June 8, 1969, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. 6 (2006), doc. 81, p. 249.

[5]. Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, March 20, 1969, subject Vietnam Situation and Options, folder 7, box 89, National Security Council Files: Vietnam Subject Files, RNPL.

[6]. Tet 1968 was a Viet Cong offensive that was turned back or militarily defeated after hard fighting, but it produced significant political and psychological consequences in the United States; e.g., a critical mass of U.S. citizens, opinion makers, and politicians were persuaded that the war was not being won and could not be won militarily. It was a major factor in Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, and it emboldened dissent against the war. In contrast, the 1970 U.S./South Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia met with some success in destroying or damaging VC/NVA headquarters and munitions stores. It was not a decisive success, but it was not designed to be that. In any case, it was not a military, political, or psychological defeat for the administration. Reactions in the United States were mixed. On the one hand, Nixon's political base supported the operation. On the other hand, the killing of students at Kent State and Jackson State, coupled with mass demonstrations across the United States, troubled Nixon but did not cause him to resign or pull out of the 1972 election or alter his strategy. The long-route Vietnam strategy he had already embarked upon continued; indeed, the invasion had been designed to protect this strategy. Moreover, almost a year after the invasion, Nixon and Kissinger initiated and supported a South Vietnamese invasion of Laos.

[7]. Assuming there was such a thing as an "American Century," other writers have mentioned 1968 as a turning point or at least the beginning of U.S. hegemonic decline, a decline related not only to U.S. reversals in Vietnam but also to global economic changes extending over decades. In any case, Schmitz's claim is problematic and requires more precise conceptualization and fuller analysis.

[8]. Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, April 12, 1969, subject My Talking Points with Dobrynin, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972*, ed. David C. Geyer, Douglas E. Selvage, and Edward C. Keefer (Washington DC: U.S. Department of State, 2007), doc. 17, p. 50nn3, 5; Telegram (Extremely Urgent), Dobrynin to Soviet Foreign Ministry, April 15, 1969, in ibid., doc. 19, pp. 53-56; Executive Office Building Conversation no. 371-19, Nixon and Haig, October 23, 1972, White House Tapes, RNPL; and Oval Office Conversation no. 760-6, Nixon and Kissinger, 8:28-8:57 a.m., August 3, 1972, White House Tapes, RNPL.

[9]. In my view, Schmitz's association of de-Americanization and Vietnamization with the Nixon Doctrine constitutes another paradox for these reasons: (a) Nixon announced the "doctrine" in July 1969, but it was not until July 1970 and afterward, according to Schmitz, that he emphasized Vietnamization over a victory strategy; (b) according to the author, Vietnamization was a default strategy, i.e., one forced on Nixon because of the failure of his previous strategy, which contradicts the argument that it followed from "doctrine"; and (c) in any case, I do not regard the so-called Nixon Doctrine as a ***doctrine*** (see my article, "The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 [March 2006]: 59-74).

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