

H-Net Reviews

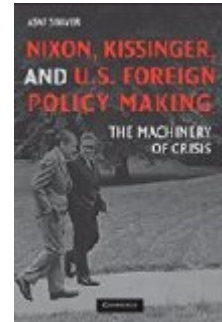
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Asaf Sniver. *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xvi + 252 pp. Illustrations. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89762-4.

Reviewed by Jussi Hanhimäki (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies)

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Crises as Cases

What new could there possibly be to say about Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and their foreign policy efforts? Both have written massive memoirs (Kissinger's amounting to over 3,500 pages in three volumes). Over the years Stephen Ambrose, Herbert Parmet, Anthony Summers, Marvin and Bernard Kalb, Jussi Hanhimäki, Robert Schulzinger, Seymour Hersh, Walter Isaacson, Robert Dallek, and Jeremi Suri, among others, have written lengthy biographies of the two. In-depth and insightful analysis of their complex bond, the policies they forged, and the crises they faced can be found in any and all of these works. It is hard to imagine a stone left unturned.

To his credit, Asaf Sniver has managed to find yet another angle from which to peer into the inner workings of the Nixon administration's foreign policy machinery. In a book that mixes international relations theory with detailed archival research, Sniver focuses on the role of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), a small interdepartmental group of high-level decision-makers chaired by Kissinger. Indeed, the author "is concerned with the mechanism of crisis decision-making during four major foreign policy crises between 1969 and 1974" (p. 1). Therefore, while Nixon and Kissinger are the key actors on the pages of Sniver's book, his goal is not to reconstruct what their foreign policy was all about but how their personalities interacted with established bureaucratic machineries and rapidly unfolding events.

Constituted in May 1969 and institutionalized in July of the same year, the WSAG functioned as the Nixon administration's crisis management team. In 1969-73, the WSAG met over two hundred times to discuss the many crises and challenges facing the administration. The record of these meetings provides the raw material for Sniver's book.

The author has chosen to focus on four crises: the U.S. invasion (sorry, "incursion") of Cambodia in the spring of 1970, the Jordanian crisis of September 1971, the Indo-Pakistani War of December 1971, and the October War of 1973. In each case, the WSAG played an important role with a significant impact on the outcome. The great virtue of Sniver's book is, indeed, his expert reconstruction of the crises and their management by the Nixon administration. As such the book has managed to add another layer of analysis to a field filled with competing treatises.

Yet one needs to question how significant these findings are. It is clear, for example, that the WSAG functioned better in the two crises in the Middle East than it did in the cases of Cambodia and India-Pakistan. If this is simply because the president himself was less involved in the Jordanian crisis and almost totally out of the picture during the October War (due to Watergate), what does this tell us about the role of such carefully designed (theoretically) bureaucratic machineries as the WSAG? Did it simply depend on the whims of the president? If so,

how many lessons can one draw from the WSAG experience?

One must also call into question the case study method and the cases chosen for this book. In one, Cambodia, American troops were directly in harm's way; in the other three cases, the United States exercised its influence either mainly via diplomatic channels (Jordan and South Asia) or through a combination of diplomatic pressure and large-scale military assistance (the October War). Different regional dynamics probably played a far more important role in the eventual outcomes of the four crises than the internal decision-making processes in Washington DC. In fact, given the outcomes of the four crises, it is no wonder that WSAG gets higher marks for its handling of the Jordanian crisis and the October War: in both, U.S. policy goals were upheld. Did the choice

of these cases perhaps determine the end results of the analysis?

Such questions aside, Sniver has produced a well-written and thoroughly researched analysis of an aspect of the Nixon administration's foreign policy that required further probing. His book will be welcomed by all who wish to have a succinct and thought-provoking analysis of how—rather than why—Nixon and Kissinger addressed their foreign policy crises. Perhaps more importantly, Sniver's book provides lessons about the constant interplay of personalities and bureaucratic processes in the making of foreign policy, whether in the United States or elsewhere. It is a valuable addition to the continuously growing body of scholarship on Nixon's and Kissinger's tenures in office.

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