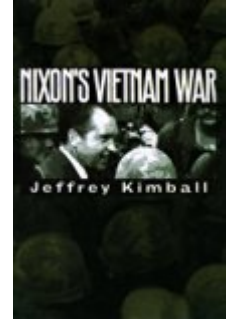


Jeffrey P. Kimball. *Nixon's Vietnam War*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998. 528 pages \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-0924-6.



Reviewed by Edwin Moise

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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.

I am grateful to Jeffrey Kimball for writing *Nixon's Vietnam War*; I learned much from it that was useful. It did, however, have a weakness that I think needs to be discussed.

One of the most important threads running through *Nixon's Vietnam War* is Nixon's desire to appear not just tough but violent, indeed unpredictably violent. He wanted his enemies in Vietnam to fear his anger. Kimball is convincing on this issue, and I think he was right to give it the emphasis he did. But given this emphasis, I think Kimball needed to pay more attention to the actual levels of U.S. combat in Vietnam, and the way they related to Nixon's effort to project toughness. Nothing could be more crucial, in projecting an image of violence, than actually being violent. There are two episodes that I think particularly needed more attention than they got.

Kimball is under the impression (p. 137) that Nixon did not, in the early months of his presidency, expand the ground war in South Vietnam back up to the levels that had prevailed before the Tet Offensive of 1968. In fact, ground combat intensified during these months to noticeably above the level of the period before Tet. The fact of such heavy combat would certainly seem consistent with Kimball's portrait of a president determined to seem tough. On the other hand, if the level of combat in those months was not mentioned in the documents often enough for Kimball to have noticed it, this suggests that Nixon was not thinking of this as an important way he was projecting toughness. If we knew whether Nixon was a strong participant in the decisions that produced the intense ground combat of February to May 1969, or whether he was sitting back and allowing the military to make its own decisions on this issue, this would provide a useful clue.

In May 1969 came the battle for "Hamburger Hill" (Dong Ap Bia, in the A Shau Valley, near the Laotian border in the western part of Thua Thien province). Units of the People's Army of Vietnam

(PAVN) had dug well-fortified positions on the hill and waited for the Americans to attack. The Americans did send troops to attack, as they had been doing in similar circumstances since the summer of 1966. It was not that the Americans were particularly interested in the hill; it was simply that there were enemy troops on it, and the U.S. practice was to attack the enemy when the opportunity offered. The goal of the attack was to destroy the PAVN force on the hill. The battle lasted from May 11 to 20; the Americans were reported to have lost 56 men killed (some sources give a slightly higher figure, which may include losses near but not on this hill). PAVN losses were far greater.

There were outraged protests in the United States; Senator Edward Kennedy in particular did not think the hill had been important enough to justify the American lives that had been lost charging up its slopes. The outrage was exacerbated when the U.S. troops walked away from the hill early in June. There were no longer enemy troops on the hill, so the U.S. command was no longer interested in it.

The uproar over "Hamburger Hill" further weakened American public support for the war, which was already shaky. Nixon responded with a major change in policy; he announced that he had ordered the U.S. command in Vietnam to hold down American casualties, in other words not to attack strong enemy positions like "Hamburger Hill." When PAVN troops re-occupied the hill shortly after the Americans had pulled off it, they were left to hold it; the Americans did not assault the hill a second time.

In the last six months of 1969, with American troops a lot less aggressive in ground combat, the number of Americans killed by hostile action in Vietnam was less than half what it had been in the first six months.

The fact that Nixon was no longer willing to pay the price of keeping pressure on the enemy forces in South Vietnam by aggressive use of

ground troops against them would very seriously have compromised his desire to project toughness and determination. But I did not notice in Kimball's book any reference either to "Hamburger Hill" and the uproar it caused, or to Nixon's order to hold down U.S. casualties.

People who are preoccupied with proving their toughness usually (if you will pardon the cliché) are not very tough. When evaluating such a person, it is important to consider all their actions and omissions, not just the ones to which they feel like drawing attention. I think it is no accident that I was unable to find any reference to "Hamburger Hill" in the index to either Nixon's memoirs or Henry Kissinger's. I also found no reference either to this battle and the uproar it caused or to Nixon's order to hold down casualties in its aftermath, when I skimmed what should have been the relevant pages in the two memoirs. Nixon's and Kissinger's reluctance to deal with the issue should have made Kimball all the more eager to analyze it.

Kimball's discussion of Operation LINEBACKER II, the famous "Christmas Bombing" of December 1972, is brief but very sound. He is more careful than most authors, for example, to get the figures right on the level of civilian casualties in Hanoi. His discussion of the worldwide storm of outrage that the bombing prompted is also brief, and also sound as far as it goes. What is missing is analysis of the relationship between the reality of the bombing and the outrage it inspired. I think Kimball was probably aware that the outrage was to a large extent based on a misunderstanding. Most of the critics of the "Christmas Bombing," in the United States and abroad, were under the impression it was a far more ruthless and brutal operation than it actually was. They thought Hanoi was suffering the sort of city-smashing, and heavy civilian casualties, that the United States had inflicted on German and Japanese cities during War II. This was not the case; while a lot of bombs were falling on military and

logistical targets around the outskirts of Hanoi, few were hitting the city center.

Kimball does not say that many people had an exaggerated idea of the ruthlessness of LINEBACKER II, so the question of why Nixon allowed them to get this exaggerated idea never comes up. It is plain that Nixon did allow it. He and his administration made so little effort to rebut the exaggerations that it is hard to escape the conclusion that they wanted LINEBACKER II to be exaggerated. Surely the reason was that portraying LINEBACKER II as the limited and restrained operation it actually was, would have contradicted the image of ruthless brutality that Nixon was trying to project. But to whom was he projecting this image? The Communist leaders in Hanoi could hardly have been fooled. They knew that their city, unlike most German and Japanese cities at the end of World War II, Pyongyang at the end of the Korean War, or towns like Vinh and Dong Hoi at the end of Lyndon Johnson's Operation ROLLING THUNDER, was still standing when Nixon's bombing ended. Was it primarily the American domestic audience Nixon wanted to convince of his toughness? Or is it conceivable that he was fooling himself, that he so loved the idea of taking the gloves off in Vietnam that he psyched himself into believing he had taken them a lot farther off than he actually had?

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