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Review by Pierre Asselin, Hawaii Pacific University

The documents in this volume address not the Vietnam War generally but the negotiations between Washington and Hanoi to establish the terms of the termination of direct American involvement in the hostilities. It is about the ‘real’ Paris peace talks, those secretly and, after January 1972, privately held on the outskirts of the French capital between Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN) special adviser Le Duc Tho and President Richard Nixon’s national security adviser Henry Kissinger.¹ While the documents in this collection offer pertinent information about the thinking and actions of DRVN authorities, they above all relate the Nixon administration’s position on war and peace in Vietnam in the period October 1972-January 1973, the last months of the American military engagement in that country. The engagement effectively ended a few weeks after the signing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam on 27 January 1973.

The volume is exceptionally insightful. There is much in here that allows us to more definitively answer some key questions surrounding the Nixon administration’s approach to ending the Vietnam War. What was discussed during the last rounds of private negotiations between Tho and Kissinger? How serious was Hanoi about reaching an agreement after 8 October? Could peace have been achieved then instead of January of the following year? Why did the negotiations collapse in early December? What were the motives behind the Nixon administration’s so-called ‘Christmas bombing’ of the DRVN later

¹ By 1969 there were two Vietnam-related negotiations going on in France. The first consisted of the secret talks between Tho and Kissinger; the second was the concurrent ‘front channel’ semi-public talks between representatives from the DRVN and the United States plus the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG, the political wing of the so-called Viet Cong) taking place at the Majestic Hotel on Avenue Kléber in the heart of Paris. The latter talks served few purposes other than those of public diplomacy/propaganda, but both Hanoi and Washington agreed to sustain them to facilitate concealment of their secret channel.

that month? What exactly happened during the final round of talks in January 1973 that broke the impasse in the negotiations? Was the January agreement better or worse than the October draft agreement? How important was South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu in delaying the completion and signing of an agreement? And, finally, did the Nixon administration truly hope to obtain from an agreement nothing but a 'decent interval' before the inevitable happened and Saigon fell to the North? Or was Nixon genuinely committed to a lasting peace, a peace 'with honor'?

It is not by coincidence that this volume begins its coverage in October 1972. That month, the DRVN presented the United States with the first complete draft of a peace agreement. The agreement was meaningful because in it Hanoi made a momentous concession: it agreed to allow Thieu to remain as head of the regime in Saigon after a cease-fire came into effect. This represented the second major breakthrough in the negotiations, and a quid pro quo of sorts for the first breakthrough: the previous year, Washington had agreed to allow DRVN forces (i.e., North Vietnamese "regulars" of the People's Army of Vietnam, or PAVN) to remain in the South after a cease-fire. Hanoi's sudden eagerness to finalize an agreement in October, apparent in the pertinent memoranda of conversations between Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger reproduced in the volume, was largely the product of the failure of the Easter Offensive launched earlier in the year, which Hanoi had hoped would cause the collapse of the South but had resulted in massive losses for the DRVN, and the belief that Nixon would be more conciliatory at the bargaining table before the upcoming presidential election in the United States than after. As it turns out, Kissinger was no less eager to end the war. When Tho pressed him for a deadline to complete and sign an agreement, Kissinger replied that "we should be able to complete it during the week of October 22" (18). Although there was no guarantee that Thieu, who was not consulted about the direction of the private talks, would acquiesce in the agreement, Kissinger promised that "we will do our utmost, our maximum, to influence Saigon to accept it" (27).

The terms of the October draft agreement, though far from ideal, were satisfactory to Washington. "If implemented with reasonable rigor," a CIA assessment noted, the draft agreement "could produce the peace with honor long sought by President Nixon and his two predecessors" (333). Indeed, in mid-October Kissinger wrote U.S. ambassador to Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker that "the President is determined to seek a settlement on cease-fire terms now, with or without Thieu" (139). However, for reasons (the status of the demilitarized zone [DMZ] between the two Vietnams, post-cessate-fire political issues, and the presence of PAVN forces in the South after a cease-fire) that are clearly delineated in the volume, Thieu rejected the draft agreement. Contrary to what Kissinger had told Bunker of Nixon's intentions, the President refused to go it alone. He deferred to Thieu and implored Hanoi to reopen negotiations so that adjustments to the agreement could be made and Saigon could be appeased.

As this and subsequent events reveal, securing Thieu's sanction of the agreement negotiated with Hanoi was extremely important to Nixon. Among the interesting revelations to come out of the volume are the lengths to which Nixon was prepared to go to get Thieu's consent. "We must have Thieu as a willing partner in making any agreement" (220), he told Kissinger in late October. To that end, his administration spared no effort to

accommodate and assuage Thieu's concerns. From reading the volume one gets the distinct impression that for Nixon, 'peace with honor' meant peace with Hanoi and Saigon, and peace between Hanoi and Saigon. While Kissinger was clearly open to and eventually pressed Nixon for a bilateral deal with Hanoi, the American president could never reconcile himself to that idea. "Making a bilateral thing" was "repugnant" to Nixon "because we lose everything we've done – we could have done that years ago" (420). Thus, there was no possibility of peace in October 1972 because Thieu had no intention of being a party to a compromise agreement and Nixon was absolutely convinced he had to abide Thieu. And while the upcoming presidential election weighed on Nixon's conscience, unlike Kissinger, he was in no rush to complete an agreement before that time. In fact, he preferred "some viable course which would permit us to delay a settlement until after November 7 and hopefully to prevent a blow from either the North or the South before that time" (234). Nixon later confided in Alexander Haig, his Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs, that "we should not have allowed Henry to feel so compulsive about that election deadline (577).

Hanoi agreed to resume the talks in November. By early December, the two sides had settled all substantive issues except for the DMZ. "The way they phrase [the language on the DMZ]," Kissinger explained later, "we would not just leave their troops there, we would abolish the dividing line between North and South Vietnam, after which they would have an unlimited right of intervention" (642). Washington thus asked for language that strengthened the status of the DMZ, which Hanoi rejected. From the available record it appears that Le Duc Tho was prepared to concede on the issue, but the majority in the Politburo in Hanoi "decided to play for time" (593-94) and suspended the negotiations instead. Exasperated by this turn of events, Nixon searched for ways to break this latest impasse in the talks, to "get their [i.e., the North Vietnamese] attention" (587). He ultimately opted for a plan to "bomb the hell out of 'em" (586) by using B-52s to strike targets in and around Hanoi, to deal "a tremendous psychological blow" (586) to and thus "impress" (587) North Vietnamese decision-makers. "The point," Nixon claimed, was for the campaign to have "symbolism" (588). DRVN negotiators and decision-makers had been forthcoming in the talks in the past "because of their fear of the bombing" (603), the Nixon administration thought. A dramatic bombing campaign against Hanoi itself would have "greater impact, and give the enemy more pause about what would follow" (552).

Some scholars have advanced the argument that the late December 1972 'Christmas bombing' of Hanoi and Haiphong, code-named Linebacker II, was intended more as a means of convincing Saigon to sign an agreement – by demonstrating the resoluteness of the Nixon administration to punish the North if it violated the cease-fire – than as a coercive measure to bring Hanoi back to the conference table and squeeze one more, final concession out of it. Historian Jeffrey Kimball, for example, has written that "in its purpose, Linebacker II was aimed less at punishing Hanoi into making concessions and more at providing Saigon with incentives to cooperate."² The bombing thus represented a "signal"

² Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 364.

that Washington “might intervene with airpower in the civil war that lay ahead.”³ The volume under review leaves no doubt that the December bombing aimed above all to persuade Hanoi to resume the talks and concede on the DMZ (as well as on the lesser issue of the preamble/signing procedure) so that an agreement could be completed. Bombing the North to ‘move’ Thieu simply did not figure in the administration’s strategic calculations according to the documents in this volume.

Nixon’s stratagem was politically costly, but paid dividends. In January 1973 Hanoi returned to the bargaining table and agreed to the same language on the DMZ it had rejected the month before. That and other, lesser concessions allowed the two sides to finalize an agreement eventually signed by all sides – Washington, Hanoi, Saigon, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG, the political arm of the communist-led National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, or “Viet Cong”). Admittedly, each party endorsed the agreement begrudgingly and/or with some trepidation. But each also understood that that was the best thing to do under existing circumstances. While historians have considered these last concessions mere ‘cosmetic’ changes to the October draft agreement, they were in fact extremely meaningful, allowing as they did for the completion and signing of a multilateral deal.⁴ The October draft agreement was always just that, a draft. It may have been palatable to Washington and Hanoi, but it was unacceptable to Saigon. The changes made to that agreement after October may seem minor to some scholars, but they clearly mattered to Saigon.

The documents in the volume dispel another argument advanced by Kimball: the “decent-interval solution” according to which Nixon wanted nothing more from a peace agreement than to “countenance” Thieu’s inevitable demise after “an appropriately extended period following American withdrawal.”⁵ Nixon clearly aspired to achieve more than that as he pursued the negotiations. After Kissinger briefed him about the October draft agreement, Nixon told him that the war must be terminated “with honor,” that “I am not going to allow the United States to be destroyed in this thing,” and that “these little assholes [i.e., the North Vietnamese] are not going to do it to us” (123). In mid-November, the President instructed Kissinger to “get the very best agreement you can” (421). Shortly thereafter, he pressed his National Security Adviser to “take a hard line with Saigon and an equally hard line with Hanoi” as “our aim will continue to be to end the war with honor.” “And if because of the pursuit of our strategy and the accident of the timing of the election we are now in a public relations corner,” he added, “we must take our lumps and see it through” (443). The administration had to “see the best possible agreement; we will not sign it until we are convinced it is sound” (505). The closest thing to a reference to a decent-interval

³ Ibid., 364.

⁴ George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* [4th ed.], (New York: Mc Graw Hill, 2002), 317; Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 159; Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 169.

⁵ Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War.*, 240.

solution is a statement Nixon made to Kissinger to the effect that “We must weigh a course of action in which at its worst we would simply decide what was necessary to offer the North Vietnamese to get our prisoners back now and get out now and take the risk of the collapse of Saigon occurring now, rather than waiting until later.” But Nixon was quick to add that “this is something we will of course do everything we can to prevent” (534).

The documents in this volume give us no reason to believe the decent-interval solution was actually a strategy followed by the Nixon administration in the Paris talks. “The agreement will be made as strong as possible but the U.S. could never rely simply on an agreement,” Nixon acknowledged; therefore, Washington must prepare “contingency plans for three-day and six-day strikes against the North.” If Hanoi violated the agreement, “the U.S. response must be all out,” the President thought; “we must have our own unilateral capability to prevent violations” (489-90). Clearly, Nixon sought from the negotiations and the peace agreement more than a decent interval before the collapse of the Saigon regime. He understood that victory was impossible; but he was unwilling to capitulate, to abandon South Vietnam, as the decent-interval theory postulates. He expected the worst, to be sure, but hoped for the best and endeavored to secure an agreement that would allow him to fulfill his aspirations. In short, Nixon was committed to getting the best deal he could from Hanoi under very challenging circumstances.

One interesting aspect that comes out of the volume is Nixon’s fair attitude vis-à-vis the North Vietnamese. In one conversation, after Kissinger brings up the issue of American reconstruction aid to the DRVN, Nixon responds: “There is no question, no problem. Give ‘em – give ‘em 10 billion, because I believe in this. The fact is if we did it with the Germans, we did it with the Japs, why not for these poor bastards? Don’t you agree Henry? Don’t you agree, Henry? Goddamnit, I feel for these people. I mean they fought for the wrong reasons, but damn it to hell, I am not – I just feel for people that fight down, and bleed, and get killed” (127). This is ‘classic’ Nixon, to be sure, but shockingly compassionate and interesting nonetheless. Equally revealing are documents 54-63 which indicate that Kissinger and Haig did not always see eye-to-eye on issues and did not trust each other.

Lastly, kudos to John Carland for a superb editing job. His notes interspersed throughout the volume make it easier to navigate the documents and understand the evolution of the peace process. They are especially useful to place into proper context key documents and/or passages within them. Carland also meaningfully enhances the usefulness of the volume by drawing from other published and unpublished sources to clarify certain issues and highlight the inconsistencies between the contents of certain documents and the recollections of key participants, including Kissinger, articulated in their personal memoirs.

Pierre Asselin is Associate Professor of History at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. He is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (North Carolina, 2002). Recent publications include “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique” in *Cold War History* (2011); “Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi’s Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era” in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2011); and “We Don’t Want a Munich’:

Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy, 1965-1968" in *Diplomatic History* (2012). His latest book project entitled *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965*" is forthcoming from the University of California Press.

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