

# H-Diplo

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### *Sticks and Carrots, Fighting and Talking, Stalemate and Compromise*

Covering the period from 20 January to 7 October 1972, this is the third of five FRUS documentary anthologies on the Nixon-Ford phase of the American War in Vietnam and Volume VIII in the *FRUS* series on the foreign policies of the Nixon and Ford administrations. The editor, John M. Carland, focused his research and based his documentary selections and annotations on “the link between force and diplomacy in U.S. national security policy toward the Vietnam War” (iv). To my knowledge, this editorial approach is more deductive and expository than the typical selection process for *FRUS* volumes, in which editors choose representative documents that relate to, throw light upon, and facilitate historical understanding of the major topics and issues of U.S. policymaking and policy implementation for the period in question — presumably without a consciously imposed thesis.<sup>1</sup>

The belligerents in the Vietnam War did of course use force with diplomacy. It was, after all, a *war*. The recognition by the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam of an incipient military stalemate in 1968 led to the start of formal negotiations between the belligerents, as well as “triangular diplomacy,” which Washington, Hanoi, Moscow, and Beijing practiced with and against one another. There has been little if any doubt in the historiography of the war that Nixon and Kissinger believed in using “sticks and carrots” to achieve their diplomatic and policy aims, just as the Politburo in Hanoi pursued a strategy of “fight and talk” to achieve theirs. However, the linguistic formulation of “force and

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<sup>1</sup> See the Office of the Historian’s explanation of editorial methodology and purpose at <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/about-frus>.

diplomacy” in discussions of U.S. foreign relations since the 1950s carries a specific Realist meaning, one which the editor of Volume VIII (and IX) intended to convey. Henry Kissinger articulated this particular meaning in a 1956 article in *Foreign Affairs*: “Force and diplomacy are not discrete realms; on the contrary, the ultimate pressure during negotiations has always been the possibility that recourse might be had to force.” He went on to advocate the “graduated” use of nuclear weapons in conflict situations, but his thesis was that the “doctrine” of threatening or using either conventional or nuclear force in support of diplomatic goals was efficacious.<sup>2</sup>

Reflecting the editor’s Kissingerian focus on the effectiveness of force in facilitating diplomacy, Ambassador Edward Brynn, the Acting Historian of the U.S. Department of State, takes an unusually strong interpretive line in the Preface. He writes: “In the period the volume covered, force *drove* diplomacy. Only by recognizing this can the process by which America’s Vietnam War policy was formulated and implemented be fully understood” (iv; emphasis added). He further maintains that “North Vietnam’s leaders refused to negotiate seriously” and instead launched their 1972 Strategic Offensive (aka Easter Offensive) on 30 March into South Vietnam. The White House response, POCKET MONEY, a mining and blockading operation against North Vietnamese ports, and LINEBACKER, a massive bombing operation into northern North Vietnam, Brynn argues, caused Hanoi “to signal that they were ready to negotiate” and also “convinced” them that “they could not win if the U.S. remained in the war” (v).

In his final Editorial Note at the conclusion of the book, Carland writes that the negotiating terms Hanoi accepted “were fundamentally those the United States had advocated since mid-1971.” The editor’s suggestion in this and the two subsequent sentences is that the documentary record supports the public argument of Nixon and Kissinger that the U.S. “honorably” departed from the scene, “leaving the political issues to be settled by the Vietnamese parties in further negotiations” (1077).

Did U.S.- applied force in the form of LINEBACKER and POCKET MONEY *drive* diplomacy, causing Hanoi to negotiate “seriously” and to concede crucial political issues, thus allowing the United States to withdraw “honorably”? This volume alone cannot provide definitive answers to these and other issues, because important U.S. textual materials and taped conversations bearing of the period from January into October 1972 are inexplicably absent, and, in addition, the book (by definition an anthology of U.S. documents only) includes but a select few excerpts of evidence from the other side.

Missing, for example, is a 21 June memorandum of conversation in which Kissinger told Zhou Enlai: “The outcome of my logic is that we are putting a time interval between the military outcome and the political outcome.”<sup>3</sup> Why did the White House want this time

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<sup>2</sup> Kissinger, “Force and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age,” *Foreign Affairs* 34, 3 (April 1956): 352.

<sup>3</sup> MemCon, Kissinger/Zhou, 21 June 1972, folder: China — Dr. Kissinger’s Visit June 1972, box 97, Country Files — Far East, HAKOF, Nixon Presidential Library.

interval? Kissinger explained its purpose in his 27 May conversation with Andrei Gromyko — also absent from Volume VIII: “We are prepared to leave so that a Communist victory is not excluded.”<sup>4</sup> Absent, too, is an Oval Office conversation on 3 August in which Kissinger tried to soothe Nixon’s recurrent worries about South Vietnam President Nguyen Van Thieu’s problematic future, reminding the Nixon that “we’ve got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which — after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it, say, this October, by January ‘74 no one will give a damn.”<sup>5</sup>

Also excluded is a 26 September memcon, in which Le Duc Tho said to Kissinger: “We don’t understand why you propose that the timing for reunification will be decided upon ‘after a suitable interval following the signing of an overall agreement.’ How you propose that — I don’t understand the reason why.” Later, Kissinger replied with what he called a “realistic” explanation:

We both have allies. . . . We have told you we will not overthrow through our actions what is the existing administration in Saigon. But we are prepared to start a process in which, as a result of local forces, changes can occur. . . . Your colleagues in Hanoi . . . should understand our position. . . . The only danger we face in the election is if we are accused of betraying our allies. [David] Dellinger is no problem to us; George Wallace is.”<sup>6</sup>

As Nixon reminded Kissinger on 30 April in a memorandum that *is* included in this volume: “Our long-range goal” is to “give the South Vietnamese reasonable chance” [but not a guarantee] to meet future attacks. “We must . . . , if possible, tip the balance in favor of the South Vietnamese for battles to come [after a settlement and U.S. withdrawal] when we no longer will be able to help them with major air strikes” (doc. 103, pp. 339, 341).

On 23 October, at a time when Kissinger had struck a deal with Le Duc Tho and was trying to win Thieu’s approval for the agreement, Nixon told Alexander Haig:

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” . . . . I don’t know that South Vietnam can survive forever.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> MemCon, Kissinger/Gromyko, 27 May 1972, *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972*, ed. David C. Geyer & Douglas E. Selva (Washington DC: Office of the Historian, 2007), 964.

<sup>5</sup> Oval Office Conversation no. 760-6, Nixon/Kissinger, 3 August 1972, White House Tapes, NPL.

<sup>6</sup> MemCon, Kissinger/Tho, 26 September 1972, folder: SENSITIVE Camp David — Vol. XVIII [Sept. 1972], box 856, For the President’s Files (Winston Lord) — China Trip/Vietnam, NSCF, NPL.

<sup>7</sup> Executive Office Building Conversation no. 371-19, Nixon/ Haig, 23 October 1972, White House Tapes, NPL (*not* included in *FRUS: Vietnam*, Vol. IX, but cf. docs. 19 & 59 in this volume).

The omissions above, as well as others, bear on the complex and subtle “decent chance/decent interval solution,” a central part of Nixon and Kissinger’s “game plan.” During the crisis of the Easter Offensive, Nixon sometimes wavered, tempted in frustration to scuttle the negotiation process and “bug out”; that is, bomb the “bejeezus” out of North Vietnam and try to get U.S. POWs back in the process but leave Thieu to his fate (e.g., docs 43, 142, & 270, pp. 142, 341, & 1009). At other times he was fearful of abandoning Thieu because of credibility considerations or adverse political repercussions. But helped along by Kissinger, he stayed on track. It was their long-term strategy — the only way out of the “nightmare” (doc. 224, p. 786). In order keep the game plan confidential, they obscured the purpose of its constituent parts.

Another puzzling omission from the volume is a conversation between Nixon and Kissinger on 25 April 1972 about the use of nuclear weapons. The president wondered whether the purpose of the forthcoming LINEBACKER operation was more “psychological” than military; Nixon favored the former. When Kissinger listed the military targets that were to be attacked, the president suggested they ought to “take the dikes out now.” As Kissinger argued against this mostly psychological tactic, which was sure to kill thousands of civilians and cause adverse political and international reactions, Nixon interjected: “I’d rather use a nuclear bomb. Have you got that ready?” Kissinger mumbled, “Now that, I think, would just be, uh, too much, uh —” Nixon interrupted: “A nuclear bomb, does that bother you? . . . I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christ’s sake!”<sup>8</sup>

There are included in this volume a few documents that record occasions when Nixon exercised greater circumspection and stopped short of recommending the use of nuclear weapons, telling subordinates only that he would threaten to use them in order to “leave it hanging over them” (e.g., doc. 131, p. 491), a tactic otherwise known as the madman theory — the principle of threatening excessive force to coerce an adversary. The 25 April 1972 conversation, however, reveals a related but different pattern of thinking, emotion, and expression: Nixon first impulsively states that he *would* use nuclear weapons, then (as though realizing what he had just said) quickly backs off, explaining that he only meant to say he would *threaten* their use. These remarks parallel similar ones Nixon made in pre-presidential conversations with confidants and in a previous conversation with Kissinger on 19 April, which is included in Volume VIII:

I’ll destroy the goddamn country, believe me. I mean destroy it, if necessary. And let me say, even the nuclear weapon if necessary. It isn’t necessary, but you know what I mean. What I mean is that shows you the extent to which I’m willing to go. By — by a nuclear weapon, I mean that we will bomb the living

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<sup>8</sup> Executive Office Building Conversation no. 332-35, Nixon/Kissinger, 25 April 1972, NPL. My transcription of this segment of conversation 332-35 — which appeared in *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon Era Strategy* (Lawrence, Univ. Press of Kansas, 2004), 214-218 — is cited in a footnote on p. 446 of the volume under review in reference to the topic of bombing dikes, but Nixon and Kissinger’s discussion of a nuclear bomb is curiously absent from the citation.

bejeezus out of North Vietnam, and then if anybody interferes we will threaten the nuclear weapon (doc. 88, p. 291).

In spite its documentary omissions, which skew the record for this climactic period of the war, Volume VIII supports a more complicated and nuanced interpretation than that suggested by the editor and the Acting Historian. It was a time when policy, politics, and diplomacy often drove the use and nonuse of force, and when personalities, emotions, strategies, tactics, bureaucratic infighting, resource limitations, economic considerations, the U.S. Congress, the Right, the antiwar movement, the Soviet Union, China, and luck influenced both force and diplomacy.

In 1971 each side had proffered selected concessions in the private negotiations in Paris. But in an environment of military deadlock, neither was able to lever the other into conceding its requisite demands on military and political issues — leading each to accuse the other of not negotiating seriously. Each continued to level this charge in 1972 (see, e.g., doc. 109, pp. 364-386).

Despite the setback they had suffered in the Laotian invasion of early 1971 and growing congressional and public impatience with the war, at the end of the year Nixon and Kissinger were hopeful that their overall game plan of Vietnamization, accelerated pacification, expanded air bombardment throughout Indochina, and great power triangular diplomacy would enable them to find an acceptable negotiated end to the American war. As Kissinger argued in a strategy memo to Nixon of September 1971, the aim would be to “close the conflict with dignity” through “an act of governmental policy . . . , not as a response to pressures and in the form of a collapse.” Given the choices, “a negotiated settlement has always been far preferable. . . . There would be a clear terminal date [for U.S. withdrawal] rather than a gradual winding down. . . . We could . . . [leave] peace [a negotiated cease-fire] behind on the battlefield and a healthy interval for South Vietnam’s fate to unfold.”<sup>9</sup> The intention was to accomplish this around the time of the American presidential election, or at least to make progress in that direction.

Despite heavy casualties incurred in the southern Laos fighting, Hanoi had been encouraged by the success of its army in turning back the South Vietnamese invasion. But Vietnamization continued to pose a threat to Communist forces in future clashes in the South, and “pacification” had weakened the National Liberation Front’s influence in the countryside. Moreover, North Vietnam’s major suppliers of military aid, the Soviet Union and China, were advising in favor of diplomatic compromise, and Hanoi faced the prospect of a U.S. bombing offensive in 1972 in and around the Red River Delta. At the end of the year, when negotiations had failed to provide a satisfactory settlement, the Politburo decided to launch a major offensive in 1972, for which it had been preparing. Its primary aims were to shatter South Vietnamese armed forces and reconstitute the National Liberation Front in rural areas, thereby positioning the DRV/NLF for negotiations with the United States and the political-military struggle with Thieu after an American withdrawal.

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<sup>9</sup> This memo is reproduced in *FRUS: Vietnam*, Vol. VII, doc. 257.

Each side was “preparing for a ferocious confrontation” in the spring and summer of 1972 (doc. 1, n. 3, p. 2), the year of the U.S. presidential campaign and election. Diplomacy in Paris and of the great power triangular variety was influencing, if not driving, the military events to come — as were U.S. presidential politics and the politics of the war in South Vietnam.

Documents included in Volume VIII confirm and illuminate several other historiographic topics and issues of the period January to October. When the Easter Offensive began on 30 March, almost all U.S. officials were surprised by its timing, power, and direction. They had expected a smaller scale February offensive in the central highlands, but the late March invasion developed as a multi-pronged main force attack with mainly North Vietnamese troops advancing with tanks, artillery, and mobile anti-aircraft guns in the northern provinces, central highlands, and farther south. As the offensive progressed, the confidence U.S. officials had previously had in the fighting ability of South Vietnamese armed forces faded, turning into abject worry.

Supported by Kissinger, Nixon initially held back from responding against the North as forcefully as he would later because of concerns not only about adverse domestic reactions but also about the possibility of the Soviets cancelling the Moscow summit scheduled for late May. Nixon’s decision in late April to go “all out” with LINEBACKER and POCKET MONEY was based upon many factors: his fears of a South Vietnamese collapse; concerns about losing the U.S. election if he lost South Vietnam; polling data indicating public support for the bombing of the North; his own long-repressed instinct to bomb and mine Hanoi and Haiphong; and H. R. Haldeman’s and Secretary of the Treasury John Connally’s bellicose advice.<sup>10</sup> Kissinger came on board as Connally’s influence grew. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and his military assistant, General Robert E. Pursley, were excluded from decision making, bypassed in the planning process, and only informed of the operations at the very last moment.

General Creighton Abrams argued for greater use of bombing resources in support of the deteriorating battle in South Vietnam versus bombing the far north of the DRV, whose military effects would only be felt in the long-run. But that happened to be another of Nixon’s motives: damaging North Vietnam’s logistic ability to re-invade South Vietnam for a year or two after a U.S. withdrawal. President Nixon, with Kissinger in tow, had chosen to deploy a considerable portion of his bombing resources against targets in the North in spite of the risks of additional setbacks in the South.

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<sup>10</sup> Nixon also became obsessed with black psyops, or “dirty tricks,” against North Vietnam (see, e.g., doc. 155, p. 577), a topic that in my view is given more space than warranted in Volume VIII. This is also the case for some Washington Special Action Group meeting minutes, which should have been treated in Editorial Notes. More of the Nixon-Kissinger-Haig telcons, memcons, taped conversations, and Admiral Thomas Moorer and Haldeman diary entries should have been included instead.

U.S. agency assessments of the fighting concluded that the bombing of North Vietnamese forces in the South (especially by B-52s) had been the decisive cause of halting the offensive. Although Northern forces had suffered enormous casualties, they had made territorial and political gains that would benefit them in the future. The performance of Southern commanders and troops had been mixed and inconsistent, and U.S. officials were dubious about their ability to stop a future Northern invasion in the absence of U.S. air support. With or without a negotiated settlement, U.S. air forces would not be aiding South Vietnam in the months and years to come. As Nixon put it in a 29 September conversation with Kissinger:

Well, by next summer [1973], you have to—Christ, by next summer, Henry, we have to get out. I think that by then you'd have to announce it. [unclear] I'd just announce it get it — and get it done with, I mean. But, I think — you know what that means? Get the air out, too (doc. 270, p. 1009).

The war remained deadlocked. By the autumn, the North had been damaged but had made territorial gains, and the NLF had been partially reconstituted. South Vietnam would be on its own in the fighting to come. Largely because of the critical role U.S. air power had played and could play in support of the South Vietnamese army, the Politburo decided in October to retract its previous political demand for Thieu's exit from the Saigon government in order to get an agreement that would completely remove remaining U.S. ground, air, and naval forces from the region.<sup>11</sup> This retraction did indeed serve the White House's goal of separating political from military issues (as the editor and Acting Historian argued) — but only some of the political issues. The October agreement recognized the de facto political authority of the NLF in areas the NVA/NLF controlled and affirmed the territorial integrity of Vietnam (as previously acknowledged in the Geneva Agreements of 1954), and it included a provision for the formation of a Committee of National Reconciliation with NLF membership. Regarding military issues, the old White House demand for the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam was absent from the settlement. Thieu opposed the October and January agreements on both political and military grounds.

In spite of its unfortunate and troubling documentary omissions, *FRUS* Volume VIII provides sufficient archival evidence for researchers to arrive at a conclusion different from that found in the Preface and Editorial Notes. LINEBACKER and POCKET MONEY (plus the December 1972 LINEBACKER II operation) helped ensure that a suitable period of time would elapse before Thieu would likely be driven from power in the 1973-1975 political-military struggle between the two Vietnamese parties. Force — driven by political-diplomatic goals and other considerations — had helped reestablish a military stalemate, producing a compromise agreement between the U.S. and the DRV that foreshadowed a brutal finale for the Vietnamese, one tilted against Thieu once the U.S. exited the scene.

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<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Message, Politburo to Paris Delegation, 4 October 1972, in Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Le Duc Tho-Kissinger Negotiations in Paris* (Hanoi: Thê'Gió Publishers, 1996), 302-303.

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