

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXI-10

Robert K. Brigham. *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam.* New York: Public Affairs, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-61039-702-5 (hardcover, \$28.00).

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INTRODUCTION BY LIEN HANG NGUYEN, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

As with most controversial subjects in U.S. foreign relations history, one rarely writes a book that makes all scholars on the subject happy. Robert Brigham's *Reckless* tackles one of the most controversial subjects of them all—Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the Vietnam War. As time recedes and current politics and politicians prompt further analysis of one of America's most studied statesmen, it becomes all the more important for scholars to reexamine Kissinger's legacy. In doing so, *Reckless* may not make all scholars happy but it does make us debate the topic.

And the reviews in this roundtable are testament to this. Carolyn Eisenberg describes *Reckless* as “penetrating” and commends Brigham for his treatment of the Paris peace negotiations, revealing Kissinger's contemptuous attitude toward Vietnamese friends and foe alike, and scrutinizing the complicated relationship between Kissinger and President Richard Nixon. While Thomas Schwartz takes exception to Brigham's treatment of the Nixon-Kissinger relationship and reveals the limits of evaluating Kissinger based solely on Vietnam policy, he describes *Reckless* as a “first-rate” study that “makes a real contribution to the literature of the Vietnam War.” Jeffrey Kimball disagrees with Schwartz on this final point and takes Brigham to task for misrepresenting Vietnam policy by “shoving Nixon into the shadows” and for omitting the scholarly debates on this subject. Edwin Moise, like Kimball, finds much fault with *Reckless*, but concludes that he would not “retract the statement...that [Brigham] makes a good and interesting case...”

I find *Reckless* to be impressive and think that it makes an important contribution to the literature on the latter half of America's Vietnam War. Indeed, Brigham's contributions to the war literature as a whole—and the skills he consistently brings to the table—are all on display in this book. From his pivotal role in *Argument without End*, his groundbreaking multi-lingual research in *Guerrilla Diplomacy*, his versatility with the social history in *ARVN*, and even tackling present-day comparisons between America's war in Vietnam and the Middle East,¹ Brigham has clearly been a leading scholar of the Vietnam War for a long time. *Reckless*—though I know it will not be Brigham's last book on the war—only serves to confirm that.

Participants:

Robert K. Brigham is the Shirley Ecker Boskey Professor of History and International Relations at Vassar College. Along with *Reckless*, Brigham is author or co-author of nine books, among them *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (Public Affairs, 2008) and *Argument without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (Public Affairs, 1999), written with former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and James G. Blight. Brigham's current project is a book about his recently-discovered biological father, a Marine combat photographer in Vietnam who earned a Purple Heart at Hue during the Tet Offensive.

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen is the Dorothy Borg Associate Professor in the History of the United States and East Asia at Columbia University. She received her BA from the University of Pennsylvania and her Ph.D. from Yale University. She is the author of *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), which won multiple prizes in the field of diplomatic and military history. Nguyen is currently working on a comprehensive history of the 1968 Tet Offensive.

¹ Robert Brigham, Robert S. McNamara, and James G. Blight, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York, Public Affairs, 1999); Brigham, *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008); Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); and Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

Carolyn Eisenberg received her Ph.D. from Columbia University and is a professor of American history and U.S. foreign policy at Hofstra University. Professor Eisenberg is the author of the prize-winning book *Drawing the Line: the American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-49* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). For this work she received the Stuart Bernath Book Prize and the Herbert Hoover Library Book Award. Professor Eisenberg is now completing a book for W.W. Norton, *Never Lose: Nixon, Kissinger and the Illusion of National Security*.

Jeffrey P. Kimball is Professor Emeritus of History at Miami University and the author of books, journal articles, book chapters, essays, and reviews on foreign relations, wars' causes and endings, alternatives to war, "primitive" warfare, nuclear history, popular culture, ideology, and historiography. His books on the Vietnam War are *To Reason Why: The Debate About the Causes of American Involvement in the Vietnam War* (McGraw Hill, 1989; Temple University Press, 1990); *Nixon's Vietnam War* (University Press of Kansas, 1998); *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (University Press of Kansas, 2004; also translated into Vietnamese and published in Hanoi by Nhan Dan Press, 2007); and, with co-author William Burr, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (University Press of Kansas, 2015).

Edwin Moise (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1977) is a Professor of History at Clemson University. He is the author of *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*, revised edition (Naval Institute Press, 2019), and *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (University Press of Kansas, 2017). He is working on a project titled *An Asymmetric Power: The United States and Its Asymmetric Wars*.

Thomas A. Schwartz is a Professor of History and Political Science at Vanderbilt University. Most recently he is the co-editor with Matthias Schulz, *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations in the 1970s* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). He is currently finishing a study of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger entitled *Henry Kissinger and American Power*.

REVIEW BY CAROLYN EISENBERG, HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

Despite a lingering shadow of ‘war crimes,’ Henry Kissinger’s reputation as a statesman of rare intellect and diplomatic dexterity has somehow persisted. While it has been decades since he last served as Secretary of State, it is striking how many prominent people have sought his wisdom over the years. The list includes foreign leaders, American presidents, Cabinet officials, members of Congress, flocks of journalists, and, in the recent past, President Donald Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Against this background, historian Robert Brigham’s penetrating new book *Reckless*, introduces a welcome dose of reality. Kissinger’s most important ongoing task as President Richard Nixon’s National Security Advisor during his first term was to find a way of extricating the United States from the Vietnam War in some ‘honorable’ fashion. This entailed years of usually secret negotiations with North Vietnamese representative Le Duc Tho. For these efforts, he and his North Vietnamese counterpart were awarded the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of their jointly achieved peace agreement. Not incidentally, Le Duc Tho turned it down.

In his delightfully clear and thoughtful account, Brigham eviscerates Kissinger’s performance in carrying out his Vietnam responsibilities. In his assessment, the National Security Advisor’s diplomatic efforts were “a total failure,”

He failed to end the diplomatic deadlock in Paris or to negotiate a political settlement in South Vietnam that left the Saigon government a reasonable chance to survive following the American withdrawal...He failed to neutralize Laos and Cambodia. He failed to secure a lasting cease-fire. He failed to obtain an international border at the Demilitarized Zone... (xi-xii).

In a succession of books and articles, Kissinger has attempted to obfuscate this dismal history.² But “facts are stubborn things,” (xii) Brigham asserts, and with so many declassified documents now available a more accurate account is possible.

From the outset, the goal of both Nixon and Kissinger was to end the war in Vietnam in a way that preserved the independence and viability of South Vietnam for the foreseeable future. This aim was not so different from that of Nixon’s predecessors, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Yet they inherited a different political and military landscape. By the time Nixon became president, there were more than half a million American soldiers in South Vietnam, the Tet offensive had exposed the startling weakness of the Saigon regime, and, most importantly, there was now a critical American public, which was eager to escape the war—though perhaps unwilling to lose.

A pivotal figure in the unfolding story was Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird.³ A canny politician, who had been serving as Republican Minority Leader in the House of Representative, Laird was convinced that the Vietnam War had become unsustainable in its existing form. To retain the public’s support, he argued for a strategy of ‘Vietnamization’—which entailed the steady withdrawal of American troops, to be accompanied by a rapid build-up of the South Vietnamese army. Within months of Nixon’s inauguration, Laird had convinced the President of the necessity for this change.

Brigham traces the Kissinger-Laird contest through the course of four years. From the very beginning, the National Security Advisor regarded Laird’s conception as extremely dangerous. Along with the President, Kissinger hoped to combine military

² See especially Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1979), and Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication From the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

³ Until recently Laird’s policy role was largely neglected by historians. However, with the publication of his memoir, this has elicited closer attention. See especially Melvin Laird, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War and Peace* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), and David L. Prentice, “Choosing ‘the Long Road’: Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, Vietnamization, and the War over Nixon’s Vietnam Strategy,” *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (June 2016): 445-474.

force with diplomacy, thereby coercing the North Vietnamese into a peace agreement, which would salvage the Saigon government. It seemed to him quite obvious that once the United States began withdrawing significant numbers of troops in growing increments, the incentive for Hanoi to modify its agenda would rapidly diminish. Having lost this bureaucratic battle, Kissinger's response was to advocate for escalation of alternative military initiatives, rather than reconsider his commitment to 'coercive diplomacy.'

Brigham effectively argues that while declining troop levels hindered his negotiations with Hanoi, Kissinger also handicapped himself by his unwillingness to tap the expertise of other members of the Administration. It is no secret that he was ferociously competitive with Secretary of State William Rogers. But the author broadens the point. Because of Kissinger's compulsive secretiveness and jealousy, outside his own national security staff, he was deprived of the knowledge and experience that might have opened other more useful approaches

A related flaw was his contemptuous attitude towards the leadership of South Vietnam or for that matter, any South Vietnamese individuals with independent ideas about a way forward. Although earnestly proclaiming the urgency of preserving freedom and democracy in South Vietnam—a commitment so vital that Americans and Asians were dying every day—he was utterly indifferent to his ally's point of view. His deafness to Saigon's concerns was to prove disastrous, when in the final phases of his peace negotiations he unexpectedly faced a full-scale revolt by the South Vietnamese government.⁴

For Kissinger, the one person who truly mattered was Richard Nixon. Brigham manages to cast fresh light on this long scrutinized relationship. Like an anxious lover, Kissinger was perpetually on edge, looking for clues about the President's ever-changing attitude. He was not wrong to worry, since Nixon was often fed up with his histrionics and eager to be rid of him. At the same time, Kissinger was attuned to Nixon's insecurities and dependence. With large doses of flattery, the National Security Advisor readily lied to his boss, especially on the progress of the peace negotiations. He was forever discerning signs that Hanoi was cracking, even when the evidence for this was slight or non-existent. This earned him additional trips to Paris, which he saw as vital to his personal standing within the Administration.

Because real concessions by Hanoi were slow in coming, Kissinger aligned himself with the most 'hawkish' approaches to the war, many favored by the military. On key decisions—the bombing and subsequent invasion of Cambodia, the South Vietnamese advance into Laos (officially called Lam Son 719), the massive bombing of North Vietnam in response to the 1972 Easter offensive," he opposed the more pacific inclinations of Secretary of State Rogers and Secretary of Defense Laird. His support for these militaristic initiatives tightened his bond with Nixon, while in theory pushing Hanoi into a more conciliatory stance.

Brigham's treatment of the complex peace negotiations is both deft and precise. It is no small feat to navigate these dense transcripts and make their content accessible to a broad readership. By the fall of 1972, North Vietnam finally made what appeared to Kissinger an enormous concession: agreeing to a standstill ceasefire, while abandoning the requirement that the Thieu government be removed. Yet by the time it adopted this position, it had more than 140,000 soldiers in the South, giving it vastly increased prospects for eventually taking over.

Having achieved this deal, Kissinger cheerfully headed off to Saigon, expecting an enthusiastic response. As he should have predicted, President Thieu and his colleagues understandably concluded they had been sold out, and refused to sign. It took several months, thousands of American air strikes on Hanoi and its environs, along with Nixon's furious threat to cut off aid, before Saigon unhappily agreed to sign.

⁴ This conflict has been elaborately described by Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and the Betrayal of Vietnam* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2001).

In relating this story, Brigham appears to support the view that the 1973 peace agreement constituted a kind of victory for Hanoi. This assessment remains controversial among his fellow historians.⁵ It is no surprise that in his subsequent writing, Kissinger has vigorously asserted the opposite. Kissinger maintains that by the summer of 1972, the United States had effectively won the war and was therefore able to obtain a favorable peace agreement, which would have preserved South Vietnamese's independence. Some combination of Congressional obstructionism and Watergate woes prevented the enforcement mechanism from being utilized. Hanoi was left free to violate the agreement, with impunity, while South Vietnam was deprived of aid.⁶

For historians who regard the Paris Peace Agreement as an American achievement, a related claim is that Nixon and Kissinger's triangular diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China had born fruit. According to this interpretation, the enticing prospect of an improved relationship with the United States motivated the two Communist superpowers to put significant pressure on their North Vietnamese ally.⁷ While Brigham takes note of Hanoi's shift, he does not see the intervention of the communist Superpowers as that decisive in shaping its' response. For him, it is the American concessions that matter more. Chief among these was the American acceptance of the roughly 140,000 North Vietnamese soldiers in the South.

Also significant was Kissinger's tacit acquiescence to the administrative control of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in the places, where its military predominated. In this respect, Brigham's account approaches the "decent interval" thesis advanced by Jeffrey Kimball and others—the idea that Nixon and Kissinger fully expected South Vietnam to be overrun by the enemy.⁸ The real purpose of the Paris Peace Agreement was to delay that outcome. Hopefully this would not occur on their watch, lest the public wonder why so much American blood and treasure had been squandered.

While veering towards this point of view, Brigham seems reluctant to embrace it. He is so keenly aware of the deceptions and self-deceptions of Kissinger and the President that the goal of a "decent interval" seems more hard-headed than was usual.

While the author is hardly the first historian or journalist to take aim at Kissinger's inflated reputation, this book is illuminating in a distinctive way. Brigham's close scrutiny of the Vietnam negotiations and their link to the fighting on the ground highlights the perversion of executive power during this period. One could argue that this concentration of decision-making reflected a war-time need for efficiency. However, as Brigham clearly demonstrates, in their management of America's exit from the Vietnam War, Kissinger and Nixon were as incompetent as they were morally deficient.⁹

⁵ See for example, Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi and the Making of the Paris Peace Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: an International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

⁶ See for example Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 463-480.

⁷ Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), and Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

⁹ On this matter of their competence, see especially Jussi M. Hahnimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

Yet a question remains. Granted the hyper-emotional nature of Kissinger's diplomacy, the litany of lies that accompanied it, and the porous agreement that was its culmination, was there some better way to manage the Vietnam War? Running through the narrative, there is an implication of some viable alternative. In one section of the book, Brigham suggests the following:

By cutting Saigon out of the process, Kissinger missed the opportunity to explore a potential and important asset: other political options in South Vietnam that may have garnered more support among the population than the corrupt Thieu. Non-military leaders were present in many realms of South Vietnamese civil society, but Kissinger's negotiating strategy failed to surface them. (69).

However, he leaves this thread hanging. Brigham's more important point is that Kissinger needlessly 'prolonged the war,' at great human cost. But was there really a better way to end it, short of unilateral withdrawal, which had been excluded from the outset?

One of the interesting sub-themes in *Reckless* is the role of Congress and of public opinion. Brigham repeatedly mentions how fear of Congressional action was a limiting factor for the administration. From the Nixon administration's earliest months, there was an apprehension that Congress would pass a bill de-funding the war or mandating a troop withdrawal. It was that possibility which partly drove Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's relentless advocacy of 'Vietnamization.' While Kissinger was inclined to personalize Laird's stance, viewing it as a simple case of bureaucratic rivalry, even he was forced to reckon with the mounting Congressional dissent.

That opposition was fueled by a vast and dynamic peace movement, along with the more diffuse discontent of the broader public, as revealed in the polls. So whether in the person of Melvin Laird, or of impatient legislators, the pressure on the administration to reduce American casualties and curb the destruction in Southeast Asia was on the rise. Such sentiment on Capitol Hill eventually culminated in November 1972, when three of the most pro-war senators, Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), John Tower (R-TX), and John Stennis (D-MS) informed the President that once the new Congress took over in January 1973 they no longer had the votes to continue the war.

On the other side of the controversy was the American military, whose influence over policy Brigham tends to downplay. In the aftermath of Tet, its desire to succeed in Vietnam and to cast off previous restraints was, if anything, more intense. Whether at General Creighton Abrams headquarters in Saigon or among the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon, there was an eagerness for more military options: ideally more troops, but since this was ruled out, then a more unbridled air war, or major operations into Cambodia and Laos, where thousands of enemy soldiers were finding sanctuary. Nor was it simply the military that thought this way. Throughout the national security bureaucracies there was a generalized reluctance to accept defeat.

Given these cross pressures and an angry commander-in-chief, who had absorbed the Cold War bromides about 'credibility,' what constructive role could a National Security Advisor play? There was nothing in the prior records of previous officeholders McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow to provide guidance or inspiration. And there was something else: by the end of 1969, an additional 11,000 Americans had died in Vietnam. Whatever alternatives might have seemed possible on Inauguration Day had shrunk considerably, because now there were these deaths to vindicate, plus the thousands of physically and emotionally damaged young men filling the hospitals for veterans.

Along this treacherous path walked Henry Kissinger—power-craving, amoral and clever. Brigham has done a brilliant job of illuminating his failures. In that cross-fire of social forces was it surprising that a self-styled Houdini would emerge, peddling his insights? A million people became casualties of his errors and that of his commander-in-chief. But it is one of history's mysteries that the advice-giving goes on.

REVIEW BY JEFFREY P. KIMBALL, MIAMI UNIVERSITY, EMERITUS

During Richard M. Nixon's presidency, observers found it difficult to discern who orchestrated the administration's foreign policy: the president, his national security advisor, Henry A. Kissinger, or both acting in conjunction. At the onset of rapprochement with China and détente with the Soviet Union in 1972, for example, their names had blended into one in the public's consciousness as "Nixinger."¹⁰ Kissinger had acquired his virtual coequal public status in part by cultivating the favor of the press and self-promoting his peripatetic role in carrying out the administration's diplomacy. With the publication in 1979 of *White House Years*—his thick 1,521 page historical memoir of the Nixon administration's foreign policy—Kissinger emphasized and enhanced his contributions to the administration's foreign policy while occasionally disparaging Nixon's personality and behavior.¹¹

In *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam*, historian Robert K. Brigham shoves Nixon into the shadows while mistakenly portraying Kissinger as the prime architect of the administration's Vietnam War strategies and policies, from the pre-presidential election conspiracy between the Nixon camp and Anna Chennault, to the bombing and invasion of Cambodia and Laos, to the slow four-year withdrawal of U.S. troops, to the conduct of private talks with Hanoi's leader Le Duc Tho, to the bombing of Hanoi and the 1973 Paris agreement. Brigham, however, never makes clear what it was that was 'reckless' about Kissinger's purported initiatives and actions. Instead, the author highlights what he considers Kissinger's guile. But duplicitous cunning is a quite different behavior than recklessness. Further, while Brigham incorporates a few recently declassified documents on the issues at hand, his citations are sparse—both with regard to primary and secondary sources. The book also lacks a bibliography.

Based on what I understand about what the abundant available manuscript and printed primary documents reveal about the relationship between Nixon and Kissinger, the most serious problem with Brigham's attribution of administration foreign policy design and guile to Kissinger is that he was more the policy implementer and tactician, while Nixon was more the policymaker and strategist. Nixon appreciated Kissinger's guile in that role. As president, Nixon was also the boss, and he occasionally thought Kissinger to be alternately self-aggrandizing and excessively nervous about his status in the administration—especially in 1969 and 1970. He also thought him a poor negotiator. Nonetheless, Nixon kept Kissinger on board. He did so not only because Kissinger became a popular figure with the press and public but also—and primarily—because he was useful as a devious and willing operative who cooperated with Nixon in wrapping administration intentions and goals in a cocoon of secrecy and deception. Kissinger also cooperated with Nixon in preventing Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird from exerting too much influence on White House policymaking and diplomacy, especially with regard to the conduct of the Vietnam War.

On this important matter of Nixon-administration policy and strategy regarding the war in Indochina, I think Brigham gets the main story wrong. I am hard put, however, to summarize what it is that the author thinks Nixon administration policy and strategy was about, other than a bit of great-power negotiating with the Soviet Union and China combined with Kissinger's private talks with North Vietnam. The book completely misses—or at least fails to engage historiographically—the well-documented story of how Nixinger's Vietnam strategy unfolded and the terms on which it concluded.

In what I have learned in my research, it began with an emphasis in 1969 on Madman Theory threat-making that within six months was coupled with slowly developing de-Americanization and Vietnamization, as well as with probes to begin negotiations with the enemy. After threat-making failed to intimidate Hanoi, Nixon and Kissinger turned in the spring of 1970 to the heavy bombing of Cambodia and Laos, coupled with military incursions into those nations' territory. The main purposes of these operations were to protect the slow process of de-Americanization and Vietnamization, as well as to signal

¹⁰ "Foreign Relations: The Nixinger Report," *Time*, 21 February 1972.

¹¹ Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979).

Hanoi what Nixon might do militarily to North Vietnam if they did not cooperate diplomatically. These incursions coincided with the start of private negotiations with Hanoi and a new U.S. strategy of coupling military threat-making with the stretching-out of negotiations—both in tandem with the slow withdrawal of U.S. troops (mainly to placate the U.S. electorate). The kernel of this exit strategy had been outlined by Kissinger in his 1969 article in *Foreign Affairs*¹² and was probably one of the reasons why Nixon chose him as his national security advisor.

Years later, and in response to the North Vietnamese invasion of the South in 1972 (which was mainly designed to re-establish Communist forces in the South and coincided with the start of high-level U.S. talks with Moscow and Beijing), Nixon launched a heavy bombing campaign against North Vietnam. It was followed in the fall by compromise concessions in the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho negotiations by both the United States and North Vietnam—leading to the agreement in Paris that ended the American war in Vietnam on terms that ensured a ‘decent interval’ of two-and-a-half years before North Vietnam was prepared and confident enough to invade South Vietnam in order to reunite the nation under a Communist government. That interval provided Nixon and Kissinger with political cover for having failed to establish South Vietnam as a separate nation, which had been the U.S. goal since 1955. This narrative—which I believe is what actually happened—is completely missing from Brigham’s book. It is not only omitted but not even engaged in argument or incorporated in his citations. The rich historiography of this complex and troubled subject seems to have vanished with this book.

¹² Kissinger, “The Viet Nam Negotiations,” *Foreign Affairs* 47 (January 1969): 211-234.

REVIEW BY EDWIN MOISE, CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

Robert Brigham's central argument seems convincing: that National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger knowingly consigned the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) to destruction in the negotiations that produced the Paris Peace Agreement of 1973. This is not a novel conclusion, but Brigham makes a good and interesting case, based on good sources.

Many of the details are illuminating. I was struck by the way Kissinger deceived President Richard Nixon, and perhaps himself, about the odds of successful negotiations. He expressed hope in March 1970 that Hanoi's resistance to setting a timetable for withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam might be based merely on "image" (106), and after meeting Politburo member Le Duc Tho on April 4, he told Nixon falsely that Tho had proved willing to discuss a withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces (108).

But there are a distressing number of omissions and errors. The book's biggest problem is that it needs to say more about what Kissinger expected to come of the agreement he was negotiating.

Kissinger said from 1969 at least to 1971 that he wanted to separate the political and military issues. He meant that the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) would negotiate a mutual withdrawal of their military forces from South Vietnam, and leave President Nguyen Van Thieu's government, the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), to settle the political fate of South Vietnam in negotiations with the National Liberation Front (NLF, later the Provisional Revolutionary Government or PRG).

Did Kissinger actually believe there was some chance that the RVN and the NLF/PRG might negotiate a political settlement? Or did he understand, as the RVN, the NLF/PRG, and the DRV understood very well, that the RVN and the NLF/PRG were each utterly determined to destroy the other? If they ever signed an agreement promising to cease their efforts to destroy one another, each would be lying and each would know that the other was lying. The only way either could ever achieve safety was by the elimination of the other. Negotiations of the sort Kissinger was proposing, in which Thieu would actually speak for himself, could not have produced even a sham agreement like the one the United States negotiated and forced Thieu to sign in 1973, an agreement that did not settle the war because neither side signed it in good faith.

When Brigham discusses Kissinger's proposals for a separation of the political and military issues, he does not say or even appear to ask what Kissinger believed about this rather fundamental question.

Kissinger negotiated in 1972, and signed in January 1973, an agreement for a cease-fire in place. Communist and RVN forces occupied a patchwork of territories across South Vietnam, often without any clear line separating them. There were places controlled by one side in daylight and by the other side at night. Did Kissinger believe that they would actually stop shooting at one another when the agreement said they were to do so? We now know that they did not. The war continued without even an intermission of a month or two after the agreement was signed. Brigham makes it clear that Kissinger understood there would be no lasting cease-fire. Thieu and the Communists would end up settling their differences on the battlefield after the Americans were gone (220). But he does not say or appear to ask whether Kissinger believed that there would be a temporary cease-fire.

Article 20 of the Paris Agreement stated, "Foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos, totally withdraw from and refrain from reintroducing into these two countries troops, military advisers and military personnel, armaments, munitions and war material."¹³ Le Duc Tho made it plain to Kissinger in Paris that he accepted the

¹³ Text in Walter Scott Dillard, *Sixty Days to Peace: Implementing the Paris Peace Accords, Vietnam 1973* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1982), 195, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a121851.pdf>.

plain meaning of those words: he was promising to withdraw North Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and Laos.¹⁴ If Kissinger had believed Article 20 would actually be implemented, he should have celebrated it as a major victory; it would have meant closing the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Instead of asking what Kissinger believed about this, Brigham ignores the existence of Article 20, writing, “100,000 PAVN troops were permitted to remain in Cambodia and Laos, and there was no restriction in the agreement about their resupply or movement” (243).

The documentation is sometimes weak. Source notes citing a document often fail to give the date of the document; those citing a book sometimes fail to specify particular page numbers. There are times when I would like to check a statement, but Brigham either cites no source, or cites a source that does not contain the statement.

Thus Brigham begins his preface with a summary of Kissinger’s requirements, as of the beginning of 1969, for a negotiated peace. The list includes “North Vietnam had to recognize the Demilitarized Zone as an international boundary” and “any negotiated settlement had to leave the Saigon government in full political control in South Vietnam” (ix-x). But I cannot find either condition in the source cited in the note at the end of the paragraph, or in Kissinger’s famous essay “The Viet Nam Negotiations,” published in January 1969,¹⁵ and I have not noticed a source cited for either in the main text of *Reckless*.

Brigham says that in October 1965, William Colby of the CIA “assured Kissinger that the South Vietnamese forces were more than capable of handling the People’s Liberation Armed Forces” (18). This seems unlikely, and it is not supported by the source cited.

Brigham writes that General William Westmoreland “spoke of a future crossover point in the war when Hanoi would find its substantial losses in support of the southern revolution unacceptable and would quit the fight” (22). That was not what Westmoreland meant when he spoke of the crossover point, nor is such an interpretation suggested by the source Brigham cites.¹⁶

One major error is the statement that 1969, the first year of the Nixon presidency, was “the bloodiest year of the war” (67). In fact 1968 was by far the bloodiest year.

It is not true that after the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, the Soviet Union decided to prove its credentials in the socialist camp by supporting the war of national liberation in South Vietnam (54). On the contrary, Hanoi bitterly resented Moscow’s refusal to support the Vietnamese war effort in 1963 and 1964.

It is not true that Kissinger offered in the spring of 1969 to “accept the political participation of the NLF in a coalition government in South Vietnam” (51). Brigham appears to have misread a statement by Kissinger that the United States agreed that the NLF could “participate in the political life” of South Vietnam.¹⁷

¹⁴ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 1383.

¹⁵ Kissinger, “The Viet Nam Negotiations,” *Foreign Affairs* 47:2 (January 1969): 211-234.

¹⁶ For this statement Brigham cites Gregory A. Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), page 12, which says nothing that seems even slightly relevant. Daddis in fact mentioned the “crossover point” on pages 89 and 176, but he was using the term the way Westmoreland had used it: the point at which Communist losses exceeded Communist manpower inputs, so the size of the Communist forces would *begin* to shrink. The crossover point by this definition was actually achieved in 1968, but Hanoi did not quit the war. Hanoi continued fighting with somewhat reduced forces.

¹⁷ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 76-77.

Brigham writes that the US Senate passed a Cooper-Church amendment on June 30, 1970, limiting US actions in Cambodia, but that the House of Representatives rejected it, “allowing the Nixon administration to continue air operations in Cambodia (Menu) and send money and supplies to [Cambodian prime minister] Lon Nol” (120). Difficulties with this are: By this time bombing of Cambodia had nothing to do with Operation Menu, which had ended some weeks earlier. The amendment had not forbidden the provision of money, supplies, or even weapons to Lon Nol. The amendment had not forbidden bombing of Communist base areas and supply lines in Cambodia, only “combat activity in the air above Cambodia in direct support of Cambodian forces.”¹⁸ Brigham’s statement seems to have been based upon Kissinger’s very inaccurate summary of the amendment rather than on its actual text.

Brigham’s statement that “US warplanes dropped approximately 40,000 tons of bombs” on North Vietnam during Operation Linebacker II, the “Christmas bombing” of December 1972 (235), exaggerates by about a factor of two. B-52s dropped about 15,000 tons, and smaller aircraft about 5,000 tons.¹⁹

As Kissinger’s negotiations with Le Duc Tho were entering their penultimate stage in September 1972, Brigham writes that Kissinger was asking that the agreement include cease-fires for Laos and Cambodia, but that “Tho would never agree to limit North Vietnam’s infiltration routes” (203). This makes no sense for two reasons: 1) Cease-fires in Laos and Cambodia would not have interfered with the North Vietnamese infiltration routes through those countries, and indeed would have allowed infiltration to flow more freely by ending US bombing of those infiltration routes. 2) As noted above, Le Duc Tho did accept in the Paris agreement terms that, unlike cease-fires in Laos and Cambodia, actually would if implemented have had an absolutely devastating effect on North Vietnamese infiltration routes.

There are also less significant factual errors. Barry Goldwater did not go so far as to “lament” the fact that the United States had not used nuclear weapons in Vietnam (13). President Lyndon Johnson very seldom authorized American bombing of targets in Hanoi, but the blanket statement “Lyndon Johnson had refused to bomb near Hanoi” (34) is an exaggeration. President Richard Nixon announced his plans to withdraw American troops from Vietnam not on April 1, 1969, but later that year (41). It was the Chinese, not the Soviets, who had “Maoist pretensions to ideological and policy leadership of the Communist world” (54). Brigham states that in April 1972, “American B-52 bombers hit North Vietnam for the first time since November 1967” (174). The B-52s had in fact hit North Vietnam heavily in July 1968, and significantly in August, September, and October.

Looking at all the problems with Brigham’s book, I have asked myself whether I want to retract the statement in my opening paragraph, that he makes a good and interesting case for his central argument. I find I do not. There is much of value in *Reckless*. But the book could and should have been much better.

¹⁸ “Text of the Amendment,” *New York Times*, 1 July 1970, 13.

¹⁹ Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 194.

REVIEW BY THOMAS A. SCHWARTZ, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

More than 25 years ago, when I had just started teaching at Vanderbilt, I hosted a young graduate student from the University of Kentucky who was visiting Nashville. Even then, “Bob” Brigham was a remarkable scholar, captivating my undergraduate seminar with stories about archival research in the still difficult-to-visit and very remote Socialist Republic of Vietnam. His account of trying to comb through documents in poorly lit and mice-infested archives impressed us all. It was clear that he was dedicated to writing about the Vietnam War from the Vietnamese perspective. Brigham’s subsequent career has certainly lived up to this promise in both his extensive scholarship and the active role he has played in the reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam, even accompanying former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara on his trip to Vietnam in the 1990s.

I wanted to add this personal note because whatever criticism or disagreements I will offer here come from a position of enormous admiration for Bob Brigham both personally and professionally. In addition, in the interests of full disclosure, I have recently finished and sent to my publisher a book, *Henry Kissinger and American Power*, which covers many of the same topics that Brigham explores. Not surprisingly, we differ on a number of matters of interpretation regarding Kissinger’s approach to the Vietnam War. However, I am more than willing to concede that Brigham gets a lot right about President Richard Nixon’s famous National Security Adviser, a complex figure who for years to come will pose challenges in interpretation for historians. *Reckless* is a first rate work of history, well-researched and well-argued, and it makes a real contribution to the literature of the Vietnam War.

Brigham’s analysis of Kissinger’s role in the 1968 presidential election and the ‘Chennault affair’ is sound. The argument of critics of Henry Kissinger is that by sharing secret information about the Paris peace talks with the Nixon campaign, he helped encourage the Saigon government of President Nguyen Van Thieu to refuse to attend the negotiations, and thereby prevented a peace settlement of the war in 1968. This in turn also led to the election of Nixon and four more years of war. This accusation dates back to Seymour Hersh’s critical assessment of Kissinger’s role as National Security Adviser in *The Price of Power*, but was greatly amplified in the BBC documentary, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*.²⁰ With Russian involvement in the 2016 election still in the headlines, John Farrell published a Nixon biography and claimed to have found the “smoking gun” that proved Nixon’s use of Anna Chennault, the widow of the famous World War II aviator Claire Chennault and a prominent member of the pro-Nationalist China lobby, to convey assurances to South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu. Farrell deemed it the “most reprehensible” of all of Nixon’s political acts.²¹ Without exonerating Nixon or Kissinger, Brigham deflates this argument. He quotes a South Vietnamese official who made the obvious point, “We did not need a college professor from Harvard telling us how to solve our diplomatic problems” (5). Both North and South Vietnam were hardly passive observers and were acutely aware of the American election, and both sought to influence the results. Brigham is correct to note that Kissinger’s ‘meddling’ “did not influence decision making in Saigon as much as Hersh and others claim” (5).

Brigham also recognizes that Nixon appreciated Kissinger not for his access to information but because of his “understanding of power,” and his recognition that Nixon’s background might afford him the opportunity to make “bold moves” in foreign policy (5-6). It was Nixon who recognized how Kissinger could assist him in the ‘exercise of power,’ primarily the centralization of foreign policy decision making within the White House. As Brigham’s narrative continues, it becomes clear that this centralization had a decidedly political motive behind it, as the bold foreign policy moves of the

²⁰ Seymour Hersh, *The Price of Power; Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 21, and *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (2002) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0326306/>

²¹ John A. Farrell, *Richard Nixon: The Life* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), 44.

Nixon Administration, conducted by Kissinger, enhanced Nixon's electoral prospects. Brigham aptly summarizes this with his statement that "Kissinger and Nixon were two self-made men who would take on the world together" (6).

Brigham is also absolutely right to argue that Kissinger consistently exaggerated the progress he made in his secret negotiations with Hanoi, and consistently underestimated the North Vietnamese determination to prevail over the South. Brigham writes, "For the Communists...reunification of the country under the socialist banner was the party's first principle and this would not be negotiated away, no matter how elegantly Kissinger claimed it could be" (25). In this conclusion Brigham is echoing other recent historical treatments of the North Vietnamese leadership, including a recent work by Pierre Asselin, who argues in *Vietnam's American War* that North Vietnam's leader Le Duan was never going to give up on the goal of reunification, and that "No price was too great and no sacrifice too small for his regime to achieve that outcome."²² With a mixture of arrogance and profound self-confidence, Kissinger truly believed that a negotiated settlement could be reached in Vietnam, and as Brigham demonstrates, "put the best face on the substance of his secret negotiations so as to keep Nixon committed to the process" (128). How harshly one should judge Kissinger for this is open to debate – after all, there are worse things than believing in the value of negotiations – but Brigham is correct that Kissinger allowed himself to believe that he was making more progress than he was, and that a negotiated settlement of the war, one that would be satisfactory to all parties, was obtainable.

I do have my disagreements with the book, starting with its characterization of the Nixon-Kissinger relationship. Brigham sees Kissinger as consistently successful in manipulating Nixon, even when elsewhere in the book he presents plenty of evidence of Nixon not following Kissinger's advice. In my view the relationship was much more dynamic, having its highs and lows, with each man trying to manipulate the other, even as they cooperated on certain objectives. Especially during Nixon's first term, Nixon's speechwriter William Safire was far more on point in describing Kissinger's "tuning-fork relationship with the President on the matters that mattered to them most."²³ Although the relationship changed as Kissinger's star rose and after the Watergate scandal broke, in the beginning it was Kissinger who was the one tuning into Nixon's frequency, not the other way around. As important as Kissinger would ultimately be to Nixon, Brigham shows how often his advice was rejected, beginning with his support for escalating the war in 1969 and opposing Vietnamization.

Although Kissinger gradually earned Nixon's trust and became his most important adviser on foreign policy, the President was also willing to treat Kissinger quite harshly, as he did when their South Asian policy collapsed in shambles in December 1971. The White House pointed a finger of blame at Kissinger for the decision to support Pakistan, and Kissinger himself spoke of his treatment then in words made famous during Watergate, with Nixon "letting me twist slowly, slowly in the wind."²⁴ In a similar vein, Kissinger had reservations about Nixon's response to Hanoi's Easter Offensive in April 1972. Nixon's decision to bomb North Vietnam and mine Haiphong harbor shortly before his scheduled summit meeting with the Soviets in May 1972 worried Kissinger. He told Nixon that the bombing would lead to the cancellation of the summit and loss of a strategic arms agreement, and Kissinger made sure that his friends in the media knew of these reservations. Nixon gambled, believing that only by stopping the North Vietnamese offensive could he prevent the collapse of South Vietnam and guarantee his re-election.²⁵ Kissinger certainly fell quickly in line with the decision, but the episode does reflect Nixon's independence from Kissinger, and the mistake of assuming that Kissinger called the foreign policy shots during Nixon's first term.

²² Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 250.

²³ William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 160.

²⁴ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 918.

²⁵ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 420.

There is also a tension in the book about Kissinger's attitudes toward the South Vietnamese. Brigham condemns Kissinger for "stubbornly" clinging to "Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky, South Vietnam's vice president," and for failing to explore possible alternatives to their leadership (83). Only a few pages later, he notes that there was no consultation with the South Vietnamese about Kissinger's secret negotiations with Hanoi: "Kissinger was content to speak for the US allies in Saigon because he held them in such utter contempt," calling Thieu "an insane son of a bitch," and the rest of South Vietnam's leaders "bastards" (99). This contradiction is resolved when one recognizes that it was Nixon who was committed to Thieu, even though the president would later remark that he would "cut" Thieu's head off to get a peace settlement.²⁶ Ironically enough, Brigham's faulting of Kissinger for not engaging South Vietnam's civil society to find a "popular third way – [a political force] besides the Communists and Thieu/Ky" (84) that might have come to power in Saigon, reaches back to a formulation that Graham Greene criticized in his classic novel *The Quiet American*.²⁷ The appearance of this chimerical argument suggests to extent to which the book criticizes Kissinger even when there are no practical alternatives to offer.

Brigham's unrelenting criticism of Kissinger weakens the book's historical value. He argues that Vietnam is Kissinger's personal failure, even when it is not clear that any other option or decision would have resulted in a better outcome. In taking a very narrow focus on Vietnam, the book also avoids any effort to balance the outcome there with other aspects of Nixon and Kissinger's diplomacy. As Asselin makes clear in his study of North Vietnam's leadership, Hanoi was deeply worried about the way Nixon and Kissinger engaged in détente with the Soviet Union and cultivated a relationship with China. Triangular diplomacy unnerved Hanoi. Indeed, he contends that the North Vietnamese resentment of China's rapprochement with the United States ran so deep that Le Duan considered the Chinese "traitors to the interests of the revolutionary forces of the world."²⁸ It was not a long distance from there to the military clash between the two countries by the end of the decade.

What this suggests is that while Nixon and Kissinger were unable to prevent the fall of South Vietnam, they were able to rearrange the international politics of the region in a way that made the collapse less of a disaster for America's national interest than it might have been. As compelling an indictment as Brigham makes of their Vietnam policy, this was a genuine achievement.

²⁶ The tape of this Nixon conversation, 20 January 1973, can be heard at <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/cut-off-his-thieu-s-head>.

²⁷ Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (London: Heinemann, 1955).

²⁸ Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, 189. The book makes it clear that while North Vietnam's leaders won their victory in 1975, their disastrous handling of reunification brought economic collapse and the subsequent embrace of capitalist reforms against which Le Duan and his hardliner leadership had sacrificed millions of their own citizens.

AUTHOR'S RESPONSE BY ROBERT BRIGHAM, VASSAR COLLEGE

I want to thank all four reviewers for taking the time to read and comment on *Reckless*. Their insights give me much to think about and I appreciate their assessments.

Carolyn Eisenberg agrees that the most important ongoing task for National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger in Richard Nixon's first term was finding an honorable end to the war in Vietnam. While other reviewers wanted me to place Kissinger's negotiations in a broader foreign policy context, Eisenberg understands why I narrowly focused on the secret talks in Paris. She also accepts my argument that Kissinger's ego, ambition, and competitiveness hindered the negotiations. We will never know what would have happened had Kissinger included the entire national security team in the negotiations, but it could not have been much worse for South Vietnam. She also supports the idea that Kissinger was dismissive and contemptuous toward Saigon's political leaders and that this too played a negative role in how the secret negotiations ended. I do not embrace the 'decent interval' thesis enough for Eisenberg (the same is true of Jeffrey Kimball's review). This is a fair criticism. I remain convinced that Kissinger sought a reasonable chance for South Vietnam to survive throughout his secret talks with North Vietnamese negotiators Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy, but what that meant was a moving target. I take seriously her criticism that *Reckless* should have focused more on the military's influence over Vietnam policy.

Reckless is a trade press book written for a general reading audience on a very narrow topic. Jeffrey Kimball wishes that *Reckless* had explored the Nixon administration's entire Vietnam policy and that I had embraced the decent interval theory with more vigor, as he does in his outstanding book, *Nixon's Vietnam War*.²⁹ He also wanted the book to engage the historiography on the Nixon administration more fully like an academic press book naturally would. I purposefully wanted to limit my study to the negotiations and Kissinger's role in them. So much has been written recently of Kissinger's skill as a negotiator that it made sense to me to focus on what he actually accomplished in the secret negotiations. Kimball is probably correct that more needs to be done to place the negotiations in their broader foreign policy context. He believes that I give too much policy making credit to Kissinger, and that it was the president who made foreign policy. Nixon was the commander in chief, but I believe Kissinger used the secret talks to influence the formulation of Vietnam policy. Kimball is correct that Kissinger lost some of these battles too, and that *Reckless* should have embraced this reality to a greater extent.

Edwin Moise asks a very important question when he wonders what Kissinger expected to come from the agreement he was negotiating. When the Nixon administration first came to power, it was clear what conditions Kissinger thought an honorable peace had to meet. There had to be a lasting cease-fire between North and South Vietnam. Laos and Cambodia had to remain neutral. There must be a mutual troop withdrawal from South Vietnam. People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) forces inside Laos and Cambodia had to be redeployed to North Vietnam. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) had to become an international boundary. The Saigon government had to remain in political control in South Vietnam. As the war dragged on, the POW issue also became a subject in the peace talks. I think Moise is correct to assume that some of these conditions changed over time and that *Reckless* should have addressed these changes in more detail. I do capture Nixon and Kissinger in candid moments talking about what would happen to the Thieu government after the signing of a peace agreement, but Moise is correct that more could be done on this issue.

Like Kimball, Thomas Schwartz thinks that *Reckless* focuses too narrowly on Kissinger and the negotiations. As a result, the book does not "balance the outcome there with other aspects of Nixon and Kissinger's diplomacy." This balancing presents the scholar with a fundamental problem. If we flatten out Kissinger's record as a diplomat, do we normalize his shortcomings and failures? Do Kissinger's (and Nixon's) successes in the Middle East and with the Soviet Union and China balance his support and handling of affairs in Chile, South Africa, Cambodia, and Vietnam? I think this is an interesting problem for scholars to discuss and certainly more work needs to be done on Kissinger. I look forward to reading what Schwartz has done with Kissinger in his forthcoming book. Schwartz concludes that Kissinger's handling of Vietnam ended

²⁹ Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

up as less of a disaster for America's national interest than it might have been. Of course, this all depends on how you define the national interest.

Again, I thank the reviewers for their skilled assessments, and for devoting their time and energy to this discussion.