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Former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s death on 29 November 2023 came just as this H-Diplo roundtable on Carolyn Eisenberg’s important and prescient book, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*, was wrapping up. With Kissinger’s passing came the inevitable, but to me still puzzling, avalanche of lavish praise for his genius as a diplomat. “Henry Kissinger was the pre-eminent statesman of post-World War II America,” wrote Charles A. Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, in an article that aptly summarized conventional wisdom on Kissinger’s legacy among much of the Washington foreign policy establishment. As a strategist who “thought about the world in conceptual terms” and “drew on a nuanced understanding of history and geopolitics,” Kupchan argued, Kissinger enabled “the United States to pivot from a failing war in Vietnam to a much more limited and restrained version of the Cold War that promoted international stability and restored domestic consensus.”

To say that Carolyn Eisenberg offers a very different portrait of Kissinger and Vietnam and the making of late Cold War American foreign policy in her *Fire and Rain* is an understatement. Kissinger emerges, as Gregory Daddis summarizes in his astute review, not as “the adept realist depicted by fawning admirers, but a national security advisor who was constrained by ideology and a lust for power…a sycophant with an easily bruised ego who was prone to childlike tantrums.” Eisenberg, of course, is not the first scholar to make these claims about Kissinger, nor to offer a searching critique of how Kissinger and Richard Nixon approached American policy toward the war in Vietnam. The burden of her account, however, goes beyond more familiar revisionist accounts of Nixon and Kissinger policy.

For Eisenberg, the central problem is how, along with senior military leaders, the nation’s vast national security bureaucracy, and much of Congress in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Nixon White House could have turned a blind eye to the futility of the massive violence and suffering produced by what Nixon famously called “the war for peace.” As Elizabeth O’Brien Ingleson notes in her review, Eisenberg “brings together US foreign policy with domestic policy” to offer “a fine-grained analysis of Nixon and Kissinger’s policymaking processes with a multi-layered perspective of the domestic contexts in which they operated.” It was, Eisenberg argues, a set of processes that were filled with self-deception and self-interest, in which policymakers down the line, who operated in this increasingly distorted domestic milieu, could not tell the truth to one another, let alone to the American people.

There were a few exceptions. Eisenberg devotes significant attention to Nixon’s Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, documenting his surprisingly consistent advocacy for troop withdrawals from Vietnam. But Laird is the exception that proves the rule. For most Washington policymakers, “[n]ot seeing or learning about discomforting realities,” she writes, “was often the prerequisite to career advancement” (12). In that, Eisenberg suggests, Nixon and Kissinger were no different than the advisors who surrounded them.

*Fire and Rain* is largely a domestic history. Eisenberg does work to keep in view for readers the impact of Nixon policies on the lives of everyday people across Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Indeed, a focus on death and destruction for those Eisenberg sees as innocent bystanders is a crucial part of her method. She also conveys the contempt with which Nixon and Kissinger perceived their allies in the South Vietnamese state. Reviewer Pierre Asselin takes Eisenberg to task for what he sees as the absence in *Fire and Rain* of more nuanced portraits of Vietnamese policymakers, northern and southern, and of South Vietnamese civil society.

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Ingleson offers a gentler critique of Eisenberg’s US-centric focus from a broader international history perspective, noting, for instance, that placing greater attention on the centrality of Chairman Mao Zedong in the 1972 rapprochement between China and the United States would have further buttressed Eisenberg’s efforts to undercut claims about Kissinger and Nixon’s purportedly bold Cold War strategic visions.

If a more multidimensional rendering of local and global actors might have strengthened dimensions of her arguments, Eisenberg fully realizes her own broader ambitions for Fire and Rain. She is shocked by the “cynicism, dishonesty, and callousness” of Nixon and Kissinger in their policies toward Vietnam and her painstaking use of Kissinger’s telephone transcripts and recently declassified presidential papers helps convince readers to share her perspective. But in the end, she even more powerfully normalizes Nixon and Kissinger in ways that should give us pause today. “It is worth reflecting,” she writes in her response to these reviews, “that both men reached the positions they occupied because they largely conformed to the conventional ideas about war and peace.” Far from being visionary strategists, Eisenberg argues, Nixon and Kissinger exemplified an official American perspective on war. For her, the war in Vietnam was “part of a broader trajectory of policymaking, in which the resort to military power eclipses more peaceful approaches.”

Charles Kupchan titled his panegyric remembrance of Kissinger “We Forget Henry Kissinger’s Effectiveness at Our Peril.” In fact, it is Carolyn Eisenberg’s urgent Fire and Rain that helps us understand the real stakes of forgetting in our perilous times how and why Americans made war in Vietnam.

Contributors:

Carolyn Eisenberg is a Professor of US History and American Foreign Policy at Hofstra University. Her previous book, Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–49 (Cambridge University Press, 1996), was the winner of the Stuart Bernath Book Prize from the Society of Historians of Foreign Relations, the Herbert Hoover Library Prize, and was a finalist for Lionel Gelber Prize.

Mark Philip Bradley is the Bernadotte E. Schmitt Distinguished Service Professor of History at the University of Chicago and Editor of the American Historical Review. He is the author of The World Reimagined: Americans and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge University Press, 2016), Vietnam at War (Oxford University Press, 2009), and Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and served as the General Editor of the four-volume Cambridge History of America and the World (Cambridge University Press, 2021). He is currently working on an intellectual and cultural history of the global South, under contract with Yale University Press.


Gregory A. Daddis is a professor of history at San Diego State University and holds the USS Midway Chair in Modern US Military History. Daddis joined SDSU after directing the MA Program in War and Society Studies at Chapman University. Prior, he served as the Chief of the American History Division in the Department of History at the United States Military Academy at West Point. A retired US Army colonel, he deployed to both Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom. Daddis specializes in the history of the
Vietnam Wars and the Cold War era and has authored five books, including *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men’s Adventure Magazines* (2020) and *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam* (2017). He has also published numerous journal articles and several op-ed pieces commenting on current military affairs, to include writings in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *National Interest* magazine. He is the recipient of the 2022-2023 Fulbright Distinguished Scholar Award, Pembroke College, University of Oxford.

Elizabeth Ingleson is an Assistant Professor in the International History department at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Prior to her appointment there, she held positions at Yale University, Southern Methodist University, and the University of Virginia and earned her PhD in History from the University of Sydney. Her first book, *Made in China: When US-China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade* (forthcoming spring 2024 with Harvard University Press), explores how the United States and China rebuilt trade ties in the 1970s after over twenty years of isolation and in the process unwittingly reshaped global capitalism. She has written a number of articles and chapters on various aspects of US-China relations and US capitalism, and is additionally writing a book under contract with Bloomsbury Academic, *China and the United States since 1949: An International History*. 

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Fire and Rain explores “the forces that propelled [US President Richard] Nixon’s and [US National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger’s military measures forward” in Vietnam (9). It includes valuable insights on the expansion of the US effort into Cambodia in 1970 and Laos the following year. The “killing and destruction” wrought upon the three Indochinese nations by the United States is “the heart of the story” that Eisenberg relates (12). While a portion of the damage was inflicted before Nixon assumed the presidency, the author acknowledges “the fire and rain from continuous airstrikes and toxic chemicals reached a peak between 1969 and 1973” (12). By that rationale, Nixon and Kissinger bear the brunt of the blame for the “devastating personal experiences” of not just American servicemen and women, but also Indochinese civilians in the so-called Vietnam War. Both men’s “selective vision” of realities at the time was “a key to the tragedy” (12).

These arguments have merit. The problem is, they take no account of the role the Vietnamese themselves played in the story Eisenberg relates. Dismissing policymakers in Hanoi and Saigon as meaningful players in the war was excusable two decades ago; to do so today is not.

Fire and Rain is a good read, to be sure. Detractors of Nixon, Kissinger, and US foreign policy generally will love it. But that is pretty much all that this book is: another American mea culpa. It comes up short as a serious study of the American War in Vietnam largely because the story is predicated on the same old—and now debunked—notions about Vietnam and the Vietnamese. I understand that this is first and foremost a book about decisionmaking in Washington and the impact of domestic opinion on it. But the war was fought on Vietnamese soil; it was precipitated by the Vietnamese themselves; and it proved far more consequential for them than it was for Americans. For these reasons and, above all, for the sake of moving past archaic notions of the war as an American mistake and tragedy, the main Vietnamese parties to the conflict should have been more seriously considered and engaged. Eisenberg addresses those parties in her work, but their characterizations constitute caricatures. In more ways than one, Fire and Rain is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of ignoring the scholarship of those studying the American military intervention in Vietnam War on the basis of primary and secondary Vietnamese-language sources.

Eisenberg writes that the “impetus for resistance” (18) in South Vietnam came from the National Front for the Liberation of Southern Vietnam (NLF) and its military wing, the People’s Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF, or Viet Cong). As scholarship based on Vietnam’s own archives has clearly shown, the two organs answered directly to civilian and military authorities, respectively, in Hanoi.¹ She argues that the war was “largely a guerilla war” (18) marked by “the absence of large or dramatic battles” (33). In fact, the North’s army, the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN), was a modern and modernized multi-divisional army that conducted several large-scale military operations throughout the conflict, including a 77-day siege of an Allied garrison at Khe Sanh as well as a massive conventional-style attack against the South in spring 1972.² Eisenberg underscores the “perceived incompetence” (22) of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) during the Tet Offensive, when we now know Saigon was the biggest victor of the battle.³

³ The most detailed explanation of this is in George J. Veith, Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam’s Shattered Dreams (New York: Encounter Books, 2021).
The American War in Vietnam was effectively superimposed over an existing Vietnamese civil war. That civil war broke out in 1945 and grew more divisive, acerbic, and violent following the onset of France’s war of recolonization in late 1945–1946. Vietnamese battlelines were more or less formalized with the creation of the State of Vietnam (SOVN) in 1949, which eventually gave rise to the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in 1955. The RVN remained, until its collapse in 1975, the incarnation of Vietnamese anti-Communism, on the one hand, and Vietnamese non-Communist nationalism championing pluralism, on the other. It was a symbol of hope for a country that would not be dominated by Communist Party Chairman Ho Chi Minh and his comrades, whom many Vietnamese—especially in the South—perceived as stooges of Moscow and Beijing. The most ardent supporters of the RVN included Catholics (including those resettled from the North in 1954–1955), Cao Daists, Hoa Haoists, ethnic Cambodians, ethnic Chinese, members of the traditional elite and other privileged classes, and loyalists of longtime non/anti-Communist political parties such as the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) and the Dai Viet.

For all its merits, *Fire and Rain* ignores this. Instead, it argues that Ho, and only Ho, personified Vietnamese nationalism, and that his brand of Communism was far more nationalistic and humanistic than Stalinism, Maoism, or standard Marxism-Leninism. North Vietnam was “powered by a fierce nationalism,” Eisenberg asserts (338). Hanoi’s “overriding imperative” was “to reunify the country” (35). PAVN and NLF fighters, for their part, were “patriots seeking the reunification of their country, which had been divided by foreign fiat and was being ruled in the southern half by a corrupt dictatorship” (53). Overlooked here are the caveats that reunification could only take place under Hanoi’s own exclusive Communist aegis; that North Vietnamese soldiers, like their American counterparts, were merely following orders; and that the North was a far more authoritarian dictatorship than the South. Each of these points has been documented by Vietnam scholars. Unfortunately, their works are not considered in this volume. The result is a book that does not advance our understanding of the Vietnamese experience in the “Vietnam War,” and mirrors the standard, Vietnamese Communist-inspired grand narrative about it. Important facts and realities in Vietnam at the time are absent from the book. Accordingly, there is minimal context for the policies and actions pursued by the Nixon administration in Indochina. *Fire and Rain* is “diplomatic history of the most parochial sort, the history of one hand clapping,” in the formulation of historian Gaddis Smith.

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8 Quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, “Introduction” in *Diplomatic History*, 15:4 (Fall 1991), 524. The original source of the formulation, which I have been unable to locate, is presumably Gaddis Smith, “Glasnost, Diplomatic History, and the Post-Cold War Agenda” *Yale Journal of World Affairs*, 1:1 (Summer 1989), 50.
This grand narrative on Vietnamese Communism is also problematic because it validates misguided and discredited notions that those who opposed Ho and his movement were either lackeys of France or puppets of the United States. Eisenberg describes Saigon as “an authoritarian, unpopular” government, and its armed forces as “an unmotivated army still riddled with corruption and incompetence” (42). Discounting the fact that the United States had been supporting the non-Communist cause in Vietnam since 1950, Eisenberg asserts that “the American reasons for protecting the [RVN President Nguyen Van] Thieu government lacked validity” (428). Was “preservation of a South Vietnamese dictatorship a cause worth dying for?”, she asks (18). For tens of thousands of Vietnamese, it was, if only because that dictatorship was preferable to the one in the North. Indeed, her claim that “the freedoms of [the South’s] citizens were severely limited” (68) has been challenged by scholars working in Saigon’s own archives. Thieu admittedly manifested increasingly dictatorial tendencies in the lead-up to the 1971 presidential elections in South Vietnam, but that should not obfuscate the fact that a free press, freedom of expression as well as of assembly, and political pluralism were hallmarks of life below the 17th parallel for not-negligible periods of time after 1949. If Thieu was guilty of “high-handed despotism” (333) in South Vietnam, what, then, do we call Le Duan’s exercise of absolute power in the North? At a minimum, southerners always enjoyed greater freedoms than their counterparts in the North, which is a key reason so many of them fought against Ho’s armies as tenaciously and for as long—thirty years—as they did. None of this is obvious from Fire and Rain.

Eisenberg laments the ARVN’s inability to stand on its own as Washington pursued the de-Americanization of the conflict. “Absent American support,” she writes, “the South Vietnamese army was incapable of fighting effectively against their Northern enemy” (493). This overlooks the fact that it was the absence of US airpower that made everything more difficult for ARVN forces. Indeed, US ground forces themselves would have fared no better without it: the garrison at Khe Sanh would never have withstood the PAVN onslaught against it without air support. The failure here was not that of the ARVN; it was one of the American policymakers who refused to leave behind the kind of air capabilities the ARVN had gotten used to, and which were a proven means of containing advances by experienced, well-armed, and highly disciplined mainline Communist-led forces. If one wishes to demonize Nixon and Kissinger and account for their failures in Vietnam and across the rest of Indochina, this would have been a good place to start.

Some of the book’s discussions on the Vietnamese who fought against and otherwise resisted the United States and its allies are reductionist and essentialist. Eisenberg indicates in the introduction that she visited the Cu Chi tunnels outside Saigon, and that that left an impression on her (13). In fact, purely on the basis of her visit there, she rhetorically asks, “How could anyone believe that these resourceful tunnel-dwellers would be intimidated by American military power?” (13). The idea that the people living and fighting in those tunnels or elsewhere at the time were not “intimidated” by American military power is problematic to the extreme. As any Vietnamese who experienced the war in Vietnam will attest, and those who spent any length of time in a tunnel in particular, the entire experience was terrifying from beginning to end.10

American popular culture has a disturbing tendency to view actual warfare as something heroic, glorious, even romantic, when in fact it is everything but that. That tendency is on full display right now, in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. If we assume that the Vietnamese who fought the Americans were acting purely on the basis of nationalist and patriotic convictions, we will keep denying their normalcy and humanity, and never understand the course and outcome of the American War in Vietnam. And that includes the policies and actions undertaken by the Nixon administration to meet its strategic objectives in Southeast Asia. The overwhelming majority of people who fought the United States and its allies in Vietnam did so for the same reasons Americans and their allies were fighting: because their leaders were ordering them to do so. As

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9 In addition to the works by scholars mentioned in Footnote 6, see Heather Marie Stur, Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), which underscores the vibrancy of South Vietnamese political and social life.


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long as this insight is not grasped, the same old and problematic notions about the war will remain, ignoring its complexity and the basic Vietnamese realities underpinning it. The so-called Vietnam War was a Vietnamese war far more than it ever was an American one. Somehow, that fundamental reality remains entirely lost on most Americans.
Review by Gregory A. Daddis, San Diego State University

There is a sense of purpose in the layout of the Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California. After passing through a grand rotunda and under the gaze of a Norman Rockwell painting depicting the newly elected president, visitors enter into a winding exhibit that begins with the chaos and turmoil of the Vietnam-era American home front. At the end of this long hallway, Nixon’s 1968 election victory precedes a replica of the Oval Office. The discontinuity is obvious. Long-haired hippies in the streets are compared to the stature of an immaculate White House state room. From there, the museum marks the successes of Nixon’s presidency: ending the war in Vietnam and bringing home American prisoners of war; opening a bold new chapter in Cold War relationships with China and the Soviet Union; making tough choices in the Middle East and South Asia; and supporting health care, women’s rights, and the environment at home. The message is clear: Nixon and his policies turned the instability and upheaval of the mid-1960s into order and progress thanks to firm, decisive leadership.

A massive electoral victory in the 1972 election follows, before guests make a quick turn down a darkened hallway highlighting the Watergate scandal and the downfall of a presidency. Yet the exhibit planners are artful in their storytelling. A more cheerful narrative resumes by taking yet another turn “back to the beginning,” as visitors travel back to Nixon’s early life practicing law, serving in World War II, and, ultimately, becoming America’s “elder statesman.” By the final room, any thoughts of Watergate have been swept aside by memories of a man who resolutely faced challenges both at home and abroad in a way intended to inspire the nation’s next generation of courageous leaders.

In this light, Carolyn Woods Eisenberg’s Fire and Rain could be viewed as a script for what a rebellious docent might read as an act of defiance on their final day working at the presidential museum. Here is a correction to a fabrication, a rejoinder to an idealized and sanitized version of a politician based more on mythmaking than reality.

Of course, Eisenberg’s latest work is far more than a simple jeremiad against Nixon, even if it quickly becomes evident that she holds little empathy for the president and his inner circle. Rather, this is a story of how the American war in Southeast Asia came to an ignominious end as civilian policymakers and senior military leaders wrestled with the final spasms of a failed policy that brought death and destruction to peoples who posed no threat to US national security in the Cold War era.

Along the way, there aren’t many new revelatory arguments based on recently unearthed primary sources. Instead, Fire and Rain is a solid synthesis of both existing primary sources and secondary works that remind one of John Prados’s admirable single-volume history of the Vietnam War.1 There is value in a multifaceted, complex history well told, and Eisenberg imparts a crisp story that moves the reader along at a brisk pace without rushing them through important details. Despite being more than 500 pages long, the narrative never bogs down in tactical battlefield minutia or long-winded transcripts of days-long negotiating sessions.

Instead, Eisenberg seems to have her sights set on larger questions about the American wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and their relationships to the societies that suffered through what she clearly sees as wasteful, misguided, and immoral endeavors. If these wars did not necessarily have a momentum all of their own, policymakers at the time believed that to be the case. The author, however, contests such flimsy

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excuses. Decisions made within the Nixon White House, not the abstract phenomenon of war, consigned wartime victims to endure further suffering.

The central question Eisenberg thus raises is an important one. If the Nixon administration was willing to refashion new Cold War relationships with the evil Soviet Union and “Red China,” then what was the rational and overriding purpose for continuing the war in Vietnam (314, 468)? Not surprisingly, the Hofstra professor finds few, if any, acceptable answers. What emerges, then, is a calculating, disingenuous White House continuing to intervene in a civil war for no real strategic purpose other than to maintain its own political standing at home.

In many ways, Eisenberg is painting a narrative patchwork of conflicting portraits, a rogue’s gallery of deceitful policymakers who deserve our contempt rather than our admiration or sympathy. Here are ethically flawed individuals who care little for the damage they are inflicting on small, agrarian Southeast Asian countries that presented little threat to US national security.

Both Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, are staged not so much as mindless dupes, but as morally deficient men unwilling to learn about the character of the wars they were directing. Eisenberg takes these principals to task for their complete lack of curiosity and for their “intellectual rigidity” (195), especially when it came to those civilians who were most at risk of harm in a seemingly ever-expanding war. Upon taking office, the author argues, Nixon did not even implement a careful reappraisal of US strategy in Vietnam, despite the window dressing of the administration’s first National Security Studies Memorandum (NSSM-1).

In the story that Eisenberg tells, Nixon and Kissinger spend their days deluding themselves over the war’s progress, leaving little chance for developing a coherent strategy that might advance American aims while curbing the violence in Southeast Asia. Rarely did they consider how and why military force might be counterproductive to larger policy goals. In many ways, the two seemed to be incapable of wrestling with the possibility that slaughtering the enemy might not, in fact, lead to a favorable peace agreement with Hanoi (134, 149). Rather, Eisenberg presents them as embracing sunk-cost fallacies in the vain hope they might “salvage something positive from the carnage…especially when it was mainly Asians who would pay the price” (251).

The dangers of self-deception thus are a central theme in *Fire and Rain*. Nixon is rendered as a calculating politician who values the “power of fake imagery” (32), suggesting a similarity to a more recent president. He here has an almost pathological craving to be seen as “bold” (145). Indeed, in Eisenberg’s view, nearly all senior American officials lied to themselves over almost every aspect of the war in Vietnam, from pacification to Vietnamization, from intelligence briefings to bombing sorties, from talking to the press to talking to each other. In all these instances, policymakers and senior military officials never seem remotely capable of being truthful with one another.

And even in the rare instances when Nixon and Kissinger did try to learn, the war’s opaque nature kept them from gaining a true understanding of whether or not real progress was being made toward a peace settlement. Military officers, meanwhile, did not help matters, as they engaged in obfuscation, if not outright lying, about the progress of major operations like the 1971 allied incursion into Laos (259).

Readers might benefit from reflecting on what Eisenberg is hoping to impart by asking fairly big questions. How can policymakers find “optimism” when overseeing policies that lead to so much death and destruction? Was the “credibility” of the United States a reasonable justification for continuing a war that likely would end in failure? And do war managers have a responsibility to limit the spread of violence when it almost inevitably disrupts and destroys the lives of noncombatant civilians?
To Eisenberg, Kissinger in particular was neither inclined nor interested in asking such larger questions. In this rendering, the former Harvard professor is not the adept realist depicted by fawning admirers, but a national security advisor who was constrained by ideology and a lust for power. In one revealing episode, his petty jealousies with William Rogers even lead Kissinger to disparage the secretary of state to Chinese leaders (317). Throughout, Kissinger is painted as a sycophant with an easily bruised ego who was prone to childlike tantrums. Like his boss, he was obsessed with secrecy and centralizing power in the White House. He easily brushed off humanitarian crises, as in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, as long as they did not threaten US foreign policy aims or his position within the White House.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, Eisenberg sees the opening to China and the lobbying for a summit in Moscow as less Cold War strategic calculations by visionary statesmen, and more as Nixon and Kissinger flailing about for a lifeline to showcase some positive achievement in US foreign policy. What the White House wanted above all else was a political victory overseas that would boost Nixon’s sagging domestic poll numbers. The important thing to Kissinger, tellingly, was that “the China move was taking Vietnam off the front pages” (278).

None of these plans worked, however. Pacification programs inside South Vietnam largely failed, as did Vietnamization efforts to prepare the South Vietnamese government and armed forces for America’s final withdrawal. Military incursions into Cambodia and Laos were futile efforts, despite the immense bombing campaigns directed at both countries. In the end, Kissinger had no choice but to offer a major concession for peace negotiations to proceed: North Vietnamese troops would be allowed to remain inside South Vietnam after the Americans departed.

Even South Vietnam, in some ways, is depicted as an undeserving ally in this narrative. Certainly, the White House came to despise its leaders, with Kissinger calling President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu a “dope” (332). Yet Eisenberg’s narrative intimates a similar dismissiveness, in numerous cases describing the Saigon regime as a “dictatorship” (18, 68). While surely it is appropriate to acknowledge the suppression of dissent and political imprisonment, the Saigon government also allowed for opposition newspapers to be published and for rival political figures to hold office in the National Assembly. As historian Heather Marie Stur argues, “it was a government that spent twenty years trying to find its footing in the midst of a civil war and an American war, and thus there were times when it acted authoritarian out of desperation to maintain power.”

This should not excuse the state’s authoritative behavior, but context matters. And, in some ways, this is where Fire and Rain does fall a bit short. Despite the encouraging trend of recent historical works, like Stur’s, that incorporate more Vietnamese sources and voices, this work remains an American-centric tale of the final years of war in Vietnam. Without question, that is where the book’s focus lies. Yet as compassionate as the author is to the victims of this war, the South Vietnamese themselves oddly remain too often on the periphery of her story.

In this vein, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird comes closest to being drawn as a sympathetic figure within Nixon’s administration, the most passionate advocate for the US drawdown and a fierce bureaucratic fighter who gave Kissinger as good as he got. Still, Eisenberg even portrays him as a flawed cabinet member who “refrained from questioning the overall enterprise or expending political capital to cut the casualties of Vietnamese, Laotians, or Cambodians” (41). There were no heroes inside the White House in this tale, except

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3 Heather Marie Stur, email correspondence to author, 13 April 2023. For more insights, see Stur, Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
4 As an example of works relying heavily on Vietnamese sources, see Pierre Asselin, Vietnam’s American War: A History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
perhaps for the handful of national security council staffers who resigned after hearing of the president’s decision to invade Cambodia in the spring of 1970 (151-152).

Not surprisingly, the US military command in South Vietnam long had been pressing for such offensives.\(^5\) Once more, Eisenberg takes a critical stance, exposing the military headquarters as an organization of dissembling officers who shaded the truth at best, and knowingly lied at worst. At the tactical level, officers fight for no clear purpose, as on Hamburger Hill in the spring of 1969, or create false reports to cover up the “secret” bombing of Cambodia. The senior American commander, General Creighton Abrams, seems to have been out of his depth by consistently overestimating the efficacy of military force. Nor did he endear himself to the president, with Nixon threatening to cashier the “son of a bitch” on multiple occasions (400).

With these senior officers seeing any defensive strategy as a sign of weakness that would lead to increased American deaths, Eisenberg submits that they too were culpable in Nixon’s failed policies. It is the military command who incessantly called for more firepower, regardless of the damage done to Vietnamese, Cambodians, or Laotians. Nor did they seem able to grasp that the more bombs they dropped, the more they were alienating local populations and thus serving as a recruitment tool for the insurgent communist forces they were fighting.

If Abrams’s command played an active role in advancing Nixon’s deadly policies, Eisenberg suggests that Congress remained too hesitant, for far too long, to pressure the White House on the management and continuation of its wars in Southeast Asia. Surely, this was a difficult task given White House secretiveness. Still, only occasional voices rose up, like Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Ma) who, in the aftermath of the Hamburger Hill bloodletting, disparaged the White House for offering “slogans, not logic” and “scare, not reason” when pressed on justifications for the defense budget (61). The author maintains, though, that antiwar legislation did in fact matter, if only to pressure Nixon into realizing that domestic support for his Vietnam policy was not indefinite.

The one politician who emerges as a heroic figure in this narration is Senator George McGovern, whom Eisenberg portrays as having provided a “hefty push towards the attainment of peace” (458). And yet even here the South Dakotan Democrat fills the role of tragic hero. It was Nixon, not McGovern, who reaped the political rewards of congressional pressure, with the president’s withdrawal of US troops taking the wind out of claims that he was not committed to peace.

Of course, in terms of political tragedies, Nixon would come to epitomize the allegory, his worst tendencies ultimately leading him to the Watergate scandal, ironically at the very moment “peace” seemed to be at hand in Vietnam. In the end, the president had achieved neither peace nor honor, and in Fire and Rain one wonders if Nixon was capable of either.

If there is a central purpose here, it seems to be that Eisenberg wants her fellow American citizens to be more attentive to the tragedy of war. Over and over again, the author notes that Americans were not paying close enough attention to the events in Southeast Asia, despite the domestic antiwar protests and discouraging news reports from overseas.

There certainly were some Americans who asked fundamental questions about war’s morality. Eisenberg clearly has a soft spot for the antiwar movement and those returning veterans courageous enough to share their disillusionment with a war gone wrong. In some way, this story suggests that those US soldiers and

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marines who were meting out violence on the administration’s behalf understood best what the war was doing to those who were caught in its wake.

In the end, Eisenberg appears to offer us all a challenge, even if *Fire and Rain* likely won’t be displayed prominently in the Nixon Presidential Library anytime soon. Collectively, citizens of the United States and other nations need to be informed enough to challenge central assumptions that policymakers and senior military officers make about the utility of armed force abroad. And to embrace the proposition that a greater application of military force may not be the shortest path to enduring peace.
President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and the wars in Southeast Asia are hardly new topics of historical inquiry. “Why,” then, “produce another study?” Carolyn Woods Eisenberg asks, eight pages into her more than 600-page book (8). It is a fair question to pose, and Eisenberg points to two answers in reply. First is the capacity to dig deep into the policymaking processes of the Nixon administration thanks to the huge number of declassified documents—including Nixon’s notorious presidential tapes—that have become available to scholars in recent years. Second, she argues that this very access has resulted in scholarship that is overly focused on Nixon and Kissinger, obscuring the significance of other policymakers, institutions, and social movements that influenced US policymaking in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Eisenberg balances these two imperatives with impressive fluidity. She weaves together a fine-grained analysis of Nixon and Kissinger’s policymaking processes with a multi-layered perspective of the domestic contexts in which they operated. The result is a book that highlights the significant roles of other US policymakers, particularly Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and the US peace movement in influencing the course of US involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

This is a history that deftly brings together US foreign policy with domestic policy – what some scholars have labelled an “intermestic” approach to US foreign relations. It is decidedly not an international history of the war. It does not ask, as others have done, why the wars in Vietnam ended the ways that they did, or why Vietnam became such a focus of great power conflict after the Second World War. Eisenberg’s central concern is not with explaining the wars per se, but rather explaining the decisions and underlying assumptions of US policymakers in final years of US military involvement. This distinction is important, as it gets at the heart of what Eisenberg set out to explain—and what she did not. Readers who are interested in an international history of the war will need to turn elsewhere. What Eisenberg offers is a captivating narrative of US policymaking processes and their immense impact on ordinary people from the United States and across Southeast Asia.

Eisenberg’s central concern is why US troops remained in Vietnam for so long into the Nixon administration: why, in other words, Nixon and Kissinger continued the war their predecessors had started. “In the aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive, the new administration had the option of terminating the war quickly and blaming the failure on its predecessors,” Eisenberg writes (515). In explaining why this did not occur, Eisenberg focuses on a key aspect of Nixon and Kissinger’s decisionmaking that has been obscured in most histories of the era but remains front and centre in her book: their profound detachment from the human suffering caused by the war.

It is here, in her focus on the human impact of the wars, that Eisenberg makes her biggest impact. Reading her book is a wrenching experience at times, as she centres the horrific and unrelenting violence that so many people endured as a result of the decisions of a handful of men. She writes a history that not only highlights the violence of war but shows how this very violence provides a core explanatory power to the question of US involvement in the first place. Nixon and Kissinger continued the war and extended it to Cambodia and

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3 For a recent exploration of this question, see Andrew Preston, “From Dong Dang to Da Nang: The Past, Present, and Future of America’s Thirty Years War for Asia,” Diplomatic History 46:1 (2022): 1-34.
Laos precisely because they were profoundly indifferent to the brutality being inflicted upon human beings who lived thousands of miles away. In a harrowing chapter on the May 1969 battle in Dong Ap Bia, for example, Eisenberg concludes with an interview given by a US soldier to reporters at CBS in which he recounted the horrors of the attack and his belief that it had all been, as he put it, “a seemingly senseless exercise” (64). Eisenberg’s final sentence of the chapter, coming after pages of heart-breaking reading, conveys her argument with an understated, yet devastating, clarity: “Irked by the story, Nixon sent a message to Kissinger and Laird citing the interview as ‘a sad commentary on our public relations effort’” (64).

Eisenberg’s portraits of Nixon and Kissinger are unrelenting and unforgiving. Her depictions of the military, the Defense and State Departments, and other domestic bureaucracies are more tempered but remain just as sharp. Time and again she points out the blind spots in the policy options US policymakers considered, drawing attention to the underlying assumptions that compelled policymakers. As she puts it pithily, the task of the national security bureaucracies “was to find ways of achieving existing goals, not ways of abandoning them” (43). Elsewhere she frames these repercussions in human terms: “so long as the United States defined its mission as ‘the defeat’ of the communists and preservation of an independent, non-communist South, it was inevitable that many would be killed or wounded” (71-72).

Precisely because this is a book about US policymaking and the ideas and assumptions that guided it, the roles of international actors are more muted and flat. The motivations of North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Soviet, and Chinese policymakers are often conveyed—if at all—through the lens of what Nixon and Kissinger thought was motivating them. The power of this narrative is that readers are given a clear sense of how US policymakers perceived situations. But readers are rarely taken out of the narrative for an analytical historical explanation of the limitations of these perceptions and the motivations—just as complex—that drove non-American actors.

I will take one example close to my own research interests, but illustrative of this tendency: the chapter on Kissinger’s secret trip to China in July 1971, in which the national security advisor worked with Premier Zhou Enlai to lay the groundwork for US-China rapprochement. Twice, the chapter cites people at the time who, upon learning of Kissinger’s trip, wanted to know what was motivating China (312). Journalists “wanted to know what the Chinese were hoping to gain from these diplomatic initiatives” (313). Readers are not offered answers, receiving instead a summary of what Kissinger said in reply.

Eisenberg’s larger argument is that the wars in Southeast Asia were important motivations in the US-China rapprochement. Nixon wanted Chinese help in negotiating with North Vietnam and extricating the United States from the fighting. By the early 1970s, Cold War geopolitics was, she argues, shaped by the wars. “This reverses more familiar accounts,” Eisenberg writes, “which assume that U.S. military actions in Southeast Asia were the consequence of Cold War fears of the communist ‘superpowers’” (8). But without unpacking the motivations compelling Chairman Mao Zedong, we are left with a lopsided view of the relationship between rapprochement and the wars in Indochina. For the United States, ending the war in Vietnam and reopening ties with China might have been linked, but since 1970 China had been busy, too, trying to extricate its troops from Vietnam. Border clashes with the Soviet Union had changed China’s strategic priorities, and after 1970 Mao made significant cuts to China’s military aid for North Vietnam.4 Unaware of this, of course, Nixon and Kissinger overestimated the extent to which China could help them in negotiations. Geopolitics influenced the war in other ways too: the rapprochement with China had the reverse effect of increasing the fighting in Vietnam, as the North Vietnamese responded with the 1972 Easter Offensive, which Lien-Hang Nguyen has shown was “aimed at undercutting Nixon’s triangular offensive in

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China and the Soviet Union. The dynamic between the wars in Southeast Asia and the Cold War look far muddier when we expand the perspective we use to understand them.

While the international dimensions of the war are limited in this book, Eisenberg delves deep in the other direction: weaving the many layers of US domestic politics into the foreign policy story. Compelling and readable, the book complements and deepens Marilyn Young’s *Vietnam Wars.* It certainly achieves what Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall have called for in “recentering” the United States in the histories of US foreign relations, particularly through attention to the domestic context. Greater balance in the international dimensions would have given a more rounded narrative to the follies of US policymakers. But ultimately, Eisenberg’s book speaks directly to the present in its scathing and impassioned critique of the militarization of US foreign policymaking that has blinded its practitioners from genuine alternatives to violence.

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Response by Carolyn Eisenberg, Hofstra University

Many thanks to Tom Maddux for organizing this roundtable, to Mark Bradley for agreeing to chair it, and to Pierre Asselin, Gregory Daddis, and Elizabeth O'Brien Ingleson for their commentary.

Before completing my book, I benefited considerably from the publication of Daddis’s book, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam*, which was especially useful in helping me to understand the military issues during this period. As Daddis notes, I was less interested in producing a “simple jeremiad” against Nixon, then engaging “larger questions about the American wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos” and the impact on those societies.

As he writes, a central theme in my book is the paradox of President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s wooing of the Soviet Union and China, while simultaneously devastating the territories of three small countries which posed no threat to the national security of the United States.

Daddis has read my book carefully and provides a thoughtful summary of key points. One item I would like to clarify is about “the rogue’s gallery of deceitful policymakers who deserve our contempt rather than admiration or sympathy.” While my view of Kissinger and Nixon is obviously negative, this was not exactly the aim of my book. The more important point (which may not have emerged with sufficient clarity) is that apart from individual psychology, both men were products of a national security culture which nurtured militaristic responses. When Kissinger surveyed the viewpoints of the people inside the relevant US bureaucracies, he found no support for a rapid withdrawal from the war.

One striking exception is Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, who was a consistent advocate for rapid troop reduction and more flexible diplomacy. And while I discuss his unwillingness to go public with his dissent, behind the scenes he was the voice of moderation. Unlike his administration colleagues, Laird was primarily a politician. Nixon had selected him because, as chairman of the House Republican Conference with experience on defense issues, he could reliably facilitate cooperation with Congress.

For Laird, these former colleagues—Democrats and Republican—were the relevant reference group, not the “national security” bureaucrats inside the administration. He was therefore acutely attuned to the political currents swirling across the country, and in particular the growing antiwar sentiment which was evident in Wisconsin. This sensibility was important to Nixon, who was always concerned about his own electoral viability.

Daddis alludes to my “soft spot for the antiwar movement” and to the activities of dissenting veterans. As readers will quickly discern, I am clearly sympathetic to the peace movement, although not necessarily to all of its manifestations. However, the goal of my book was less to allocate blame or praise, but to better explain why this disastrous American war continued for an additional five years during the Nixon presidency, and how this phase of the war ended.

In beginning my research, I was primarily focused on the role of the powerful “deciders,” and the experiences of people on the ground in Southeast Asia. However, it rapidly became apparent that the activities of the peace movement had major consequences for policymakers. This contradicted the impression that I and many fellow activists had at the time. The more familiar perception was that the protests, however large, had been ineffective.

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The most important result of antiwar agitation was to compel the Nixon administration to continue removing US troops. This process began in the summer of 1969 and continued through the end of 1972. By the time of the presidential election, the United States was without significant numbers of combat troops in South Vietnam, thus leaving no possibility of a continuation of the ground war.

In this unfolding story, Secretary Laird played a pivotal role in highlighting for Nixon the political necessity of disengagement. Although Congress repeatedly failed to pass legislation that cut off funds for the war until after the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement, behind the scenes its dissatisfaction had a continuing impact. In the aftermath of the 1972 elections, Nixon was informed by Senator John Stennis, Senator Barry Goldwater, and Representative Gerald Ford that once the new Congress had been sworn in, there would be no further appropriations for the war. That news made it essential that Kissinger settle with Hanoi.

While I describe the reluctance of Congress to take decisive action, the overall impression gained from my research is that the informal dissent of Democrats and many Republicans (some of this mediated through Laird) had a larger impact on the White House than has previously been recognized.

In her generous review, Elizabeth O’Brien Ingleson approaches my book from a different angle. She highlights my effort to situate Nixon and Kissinger within a broader institutional context, and to more directly connect decisions made at the highest levels of government to events on the ground. She identifies one of the key themes in Fire and Rain, which is that the disassociation of policymakers from the human impact of their decisions helps to explain their flawed choices. Nixon and Kissinger exemplify this phenomenon in their remarkable indifference to the suffering caused by their policies, which led to strategic mistakes. They were not unique, however. The culture and functioning of the national security bureaucracies nurtures that same indifference, and partially explains unwise choices.

Ingleson’s major criticism is that “the motivations of North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, Soviet, and Chinese policymakers are often conveyed—if at all—through the lens of what Nixon and Kissinger thought was motivating them.” To some extent this overlaps with a concern of the other reviewers: namely the US-centric focus of the book. Although Fire and Rain is frankly focused on US policy, it contains substantial material on the words and behavior of other international actors.

Ingleson is correct in noting a lack of discussion about the motivations of these other principals. I have judgments about this that did not reach the printed page. I think that the very depth of the Nixon materials, which illuminated motives, made me more reluctant than was perhaps necessary to attribute intention to less documented foreign officials.

While both Daddis and Ingleson’s reviews pay close attention to the content of my book and its analytical points, Asselin’s is plainly dismissive. He writes, “Fire and Rain is a good read to be sure. Detractors of Nixon, Kissinger, and US foreign policy generally will love it. But that is all this book is: another American mea culpa.”

Asselin suggests that the idea that America’s Vietnam war “was a mistake and a tragedy” is now “debunked” and “archaic,” and not a notion that up-to-date scholars believe. However, Asselin’s primary complaint (which differs from that of Ingleson) is my neglect of the role that North and South Vietnamese played in the story. This is odd, since my book clearly discusses the role of both Vietnamese parties. Asselin later argues that while I do in fact discuss these Vietnamese parties, “their characterizations constitute caricatures.”

Unfortunately Asselin takes several of my quotations out of context, ascribing a meaning to them they do not have. To offer only one example, he writes that “Eisenberg underscores the ‘perceived incompetence’ of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) during the Tet offensive, when we now know Saigon was the...”
biggest victor in the battle.” Read in context, my point was in fact that in the aftermath of Tet, Washington officials perceived the ARVN as incompetent, which became a factor in their decisionmaking.

Furthermore, by taking phrases from different places in my book and yoking them together, his review misrepresents my point of view. Asselin also attributes quotations to me which are paraphrases of other people’s statements. To give one example: “Eisenberg asserts that ‘the American reasons for protecting the Thieu government lacked validity.’” Read in context, it is clear that I state that this is what Premier Zhou Enlai said to Henry Kissinger in their discussions.

Asselin attributes to my narrative interpretations which are not present in the book. He suggests that my book argues that North Vietnamese Communist Party Chairman Ho Chi Minh, “and only Ho, personified Vietnamese nationalism, and that his brand of Communism was more nationalistic and humanistic than Stalinism, Maoism, or standard Marxism-Leninism.” This is not my view, nor did I express that opinion. I did say that Hanoi was powered by a fierce nationalism in explaining why the North Vietnamese leadership bitterly resented Soviet and Chinese diplomacy with the United States.

Early on in his review, Asselin asserts that “Fire and Rain is a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of ignoring the scholarship of those studying the American military intervention in Vietnam War on the basis of primary and secondary Vietnamese-language sources.” Although I have not immersed myself in the literature about the early period of the Vietnam War, I have read and considered those studies, which focus on the 1969–1973 years, including Professor Asselin’s important works.²

In the six months since the publication of my book, I have benefitted greatly from the responses of fellow historians and other commentators in panels, webinars, and in this forum. On reflection, I wish I had been more explicit about certain analytical issues that have been highlighted by the resurgence of US militarism in the aftermath of the Cold War. Of its many manifestations, the American response to the attack on 9/11 in 2001, which resulted in two decades-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, poses a related intellectual challenge.

Clearly, America’s war in Vietnam is part of a broader of trajectory of policymaking, in which the resort to military power eclipses more peaceful approaches. With this as backdrop, an ongoing issue for me was how to present Nixon and Kissinger’s roles. On the one hand, the two were the relevant “deciders:” the two people who hammered out final policies on the war, and relations with the Soviet Union and China. On the other hand, they were operating within parameters set by the bureaucracies, and, to a lesser degree, public opinion. In 1969, they were not free to simply abandon South Vietnam as a lost cause. And of course, once 10,000 US soldiers had died on their watch, their options narrowed even further.

The declassified presidential tapes and Kissinger Telcons provide historians with extraordinary access to the thinking of the two men.³ Much of this material is dramatic and shocking, revealing a degree of cynicism, dishonesty, and callousness that is beyond expectation. Yet it is worth reflecting that both men reached the positions they occupied because they largely conformed to the conventional ideas about war and peace. It is also noteworthy that long after the Vietnam debacle, the recently deceased Kissinger was consulted by American leaders, and that at age 100, his views still resonated.

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