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Inside Nixon's Vietnam War Deceptions

Book Review:

Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia

By Carolyn Woods Eisenberg

By James Thornton Harris, features editor, *History News Network*

Could the U.S. have ended the Vietnam War in 1969, saving 22,000 American men and more than one million Asian lives?

As early as 1967, Secretary of Defense [Robert McNamara](#) warned President Johnson the war was unwinnable and recommended that the U.S. stop the bombing of North Vietnam and begin to negotiate seriously. Johnson ignored him and McNamara later resigned.

During his 1968 election campaign, Richard Nixon promised to end the war and bring “peace with honor.” But he did not release any details of how he would do that. As Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, a professor of U.S. History and American Foreign Relations at Hofstra University, notes in her new book, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*, he did not have any private plans in place either. He would rely on his own reputation for “toughness” and the strategic acumen of his new National Security Advisor, [Henry Kissinger](#).

During the next four years, Nixon and Kissinger gradually reduced the number of U.S. troops – in an attempt to defuse mounting public criticism – while stepping up military aid to South Vietnam and ramping up the bombing, eventually sending B-52s over previously off-limits targets including Cambodia and Hanoi.

For Eisenberg, “The ostensible motivation for these ongoing policy choices was U.S. ‘credibility’ – the need to demonstrate the overwhelming power and resolve of the United States” to friends and enemies around the world.”

Despite increased bombing, the North Vietnamese steadily gained ground. The heightened violence and the rise in civilian deaths became, according to the author, “less a demonstration of strength than a sign to much of the world of American weakness and cruelty.”

Fire and Rain details how Nixon and Kissinger deceived the American public – and themselves – through four years of bombardment, on-and-off negotiations and mounting Congressional criticism.

Her critical portrait of the two men draws on White House tapes, recently declassified memos, telephone transcripts and memoirs from Nixon's close associates.

Her book provides a fascinating day-by-day account of how the two men fed each other's ambitions and bloated egos. Kissinger, the former academic, jealously protected his intimate relationship with the crafty, insecure Nixon by continual flattery and, when necessary, with knives-drawn bureaucratic infighting with rivals.

Kissinger carefully watched each of Nixon's major TV addresses (the President made more than a dozen such speeches in his first four years) and called immediately afterwards to congratulate him. Each time Kissinger lauded Nixon by saying the speech was "a work of art, "meaty," "on-point" and that his delivery was "powerful," or "strong, but not ingratiating" and that "it brought a lump to my throat."

Nixon, in turn, often vented his anger by sharing with Kissinger scathing criticisms of those who had "let him down." When he failed to receive needed support in Congress, he confided to Kissinger that Republican Minority Leader Hugh Scott and Minority Whip Robert Griffin, "were a miserable lot... weak leaders."

Horrible, Horrible

As the tapes reveal, the dialogue between the two men often turned morbid. In 1971, Nixon was contemplating bombing civilian targets in [North Vietnam](#).

"Bomb Haiphong. Go for 60 days of bombing. Just knock the shit out of them," Nixon mused.

"That's right," Kissinger agreed.

"And then everybody would say 'Oh horrible, horrible, horrible' (laughs). That's all right. You agree?" said Nixon on tape.

"Absolutely, absolutely," Kissinger said.

Nixon carefully played on Kissinger's rivalry with Secretary of State William Rogers. Nixon, deeply suspicious of "striped pants" diplomats was determined to set his own foreign policy, with Kissinger serving as his strategic advisor and personal messenger to the Soviets, Chinese and North Vietnamese.

This did not stop the hapless Rogers from trying to do his job as head of the State Department and raising Kissinger's ire. [H.R. Haldeman](#) wrote this in his famous diary:

"K in to see me for his periodic depression about Rogers. This time he's found Rogers is meeting with (Russian diplomat) Dobrynin tomorrow and K is absolutely convinced that

he's going to try and make his own Vietnam settlement..and take full credit for it. K's temptation is to confront Bill (Rogers)...Thinks he can scare him."

Concessions to Brezhnev

As the 1972 elections approached, Nixon was desperate to be able to claim "peace" in Vietnam. But he and Kissinger now had little to bargain with, since the U.S. had withdrawn most of the 500,000 troops that were in Vietnam in 1968. In desperation, he and Kissinger turned to an unlikely partner, the [Soviet Union](#).

Hoping to curry favor with Chairman Leonid Brezhnev, Nixon and Kissinger made a series of historic concessions. First, they would unilaterally acknowledge the "Iron Curtain" borders of Eastern Europe as permanent and accept a new Berlin agreement – without consulting their NATO allies. Second, they hastily agreed to a new SALT (strategic arms limitation agreement) they granted major concessions to the Soviets. This shocked the existing U.S. arms limitation team headed by the respected Gerard Smith.

The Russians were secretly delighted, amazed how important the long-festering Asian war had become to Nixon; but they refused to slow their huge arms shipments to the North Vietnamese.

With almost all U.S. ground troops gone, Nixon had to rely on the Air Force. In the 21 months prior to the 1972 election, the Air Force dropped more bombs on Vietnam and Cambodia than the total tonnage rained down on Nazi Germany in World War II.

In 1972, the North Vietnamese, concerned about their damaged infrastructure and anticipating that Nixon would get re-elected, returned to the negotiating table. When he met with them in Paris, Kissinger made a big concession: the North could retain all the ground in South Vietnam it had captured and keep its troops in place. An agreement quickly fell into place. In October, just ten days before the election, Kissinger announced to a crowd of reporters, "Peace is at hand."

With "peace" seemingly secure, Nixon cruised to re-election, clobbering Democrat George McGovern.

No Peace, No Honor

On January 23, 1973, just three days after his second inauguration, he told the American people that "we have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia."

But the promise of peace was another deception. Warfare in Southeast Asia continued and by 1975, South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, once independent states, had all fallen under Communist control. Nixon himself was sinking in quicksand. Deeply engaged in the [Watergate](#) cover-up. He would resign in disgrace in August 1974.

Nor did the Paris agreement bring honor to the U.S. Eisenberg observes “the unrestrained use of American firepower had multiplied enemies and discredited friends.”

Why did Nixon and Kissinger make the needed concessions and end the war four years earlier?

The author concludes “The unwillingness to stop a futile war was partly a result of (their) character and outlook. By temperament both men were drawn to military solutions and had reached a pinnacle of power by virtue of their ‘hawkish’ credentials...they readily embraced violent alternatives.”

The availability of the Nixon White House [tapes](#) and other declassified material enables Eisenberg to paint an intimate, day-by-day portrait of both men’s interactions, complete with mood swings and unpleasant epithets.

Given the fact that (to our knowledge) no President since Nixon has taped conversations inside the White House, it may be a long time before we are able to get this kind of objective, detailed report of presidential decision-making. # # # #

