A Roundtable on Carolyn Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*

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Introduction to a roundtable of Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*

Steven J. Brady

Since 1998, I have taught undergraduate courses on the US and the Wars in Indochina. I realized early in my teaching career that I was giving short shrift to the Nixon administration. My tendency was to spend significant time on the question of why successive presidential administrations committed the United States more deeply to intervention in Vietnam, and why that intervention went so wrong. If I did not treat 1969 to 1971 as an afterthought, I nevertheless did not give it equal weight. In this, I suspect, I was reflecting a broader scholarly tendency at the time to ask "why?" and "how?" while neglecting "where to?" Jeffrey Kimball had done a great service in producing the then-definitive study of Nixon's war.[1] But his book did not prompt a deluge of new works on the period. The last ten years have seen something of a correction. While the subject "Nixon/Kissinger and Indochina" has not quite become a publishing cottage industry, significant works–relying on newly-available primary sources–have raised and addressed new questions.[2]

With *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*, Carolyn Woods Eisenberg seeks to make a significant contribution to the discussion. According to the insightful assessments of Amanda C. Demmer and Addison Jensen, she has succeeded. Both are particularly impressed with Eisenberg's ability to cogently present what Demmer calls the "paradoxes" of the Nixon-Kissinger Indochina policies. It is a complex story to tell. And both reviewers agree that it is told expertly (indeed "beautifully" in Demmer's description). The salient paradox, or irony–highlighted by both Demmer and Jensen–concerned Nixon's and Kissinger's attempt to limit the people involved in proposing and deciding Indochina policy to the smallest possible numbers. This number eventually was supposed to be two, with an "assist" from White House Chief of Staff General Alexander Haig.

And yet, as Demmer and Jensen emphasize, *Fire and Rain* demonstrates that the duo in the White House was unable to prevent other voices from intruding. Within the administration, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird has recently emerged in the scholarship as a major player who was, almost uniquely, able to best Kissinger in executive infighting. Jensen observes that Eisenberg, along with David Prentice, "elevates Laird to a leading role" in the formulation of Vietnam War policy.[3] Joining Laird in breaking the two-man stranglehold on the war was Congress, which Jensen observes, often served as a conduit for the influence of the broader American public.

And then there was the peace movement, with which Nixon became obsessed. The presence of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) at protests, and the Moratorium, became a particular bane for a president whose gift and goal was the manipulation of public opinion on the war. No matter how much he tried to control both policy and narrative, other forces intruded.[4] As Eisenberg discussed in her response to the reviews, the American-sponsored 1971 Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) attack in Laos was particularly damaging for Nixon. Indeed, Lam Son 719 was a "public relations disaster" for the administration and its Vietnamization policy.[5]

The reviewers also highlight another of Eisenberg's contributions, namely the impact of Nixon administration policies on the human level. In his review, Mike Rattanasengchanh observes that *Fire and Rain* "successfully links the decisions of Nixon and Kissinger to negative results on the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao people." Jensen adds to this list "American troops and aid workers, journalists, even Vietnam's environment." If anyone is left out of the narrative, according to Jensen, it is the people of South Vietnam, and especially the soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. This is a valid criticism, though Eisenberg is not alone among scholars of the Vietnam War in this omission.

Rattanasengchanh is less convinced of the novelty of Eisenberg's contribution than are his fellow reviewers. While Demmer asserts that *Fire and Rain* will "surprise experts," Rattanasengchanh writes that the book "in some ways reads like a synthesis of other narratives from the historiographies of Nixon and Kissinger." Yet he does not explore this important criticism, nor list the titles to which he refers. This makes it difficult to assess the claim that Eisenberg's work is, in a sense, derivative.

In her response, Eisenberg is generous to Jensen's criticism. Calling her observation about the lack of ARVN voices in the book a "fair point," she admits that her reliance on primary sources, together with her inability to read Vietnamese, contributed to this absence. But she concedes little to Rattanasengchanh, who, she holds, addresses the narrative of the book while "sidestepping some of the major analytical issues." She likewise asserts that he sometimes "misunderstands my point of view," particularly regarding the reason that Nixon and Kissinger adopted policies that exacted such a massive human cost. "Selective vision," as she puts it, consisted not merely of discrete ideas leading to policies, but also of "a language, a set of norms, and a way of functioning that limited what [Nixon and Kissinger] could see." She thus takes causation beyond the personalities and proclivities of a small set of policymakers.

As these three reviews indicate, *Fire and Rain* is a detailed, rich, and well-written study of a highly significant subject. Agree or disagree with Eisenberg's conclusions, this

book will be the departure point for any future scholarship on the Nixon administration's Indochina policy. Hopefully, much more of it will follow.

Notes:
1. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).
2. See, in particular, David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014); Jeffrey P. Kimball and William Burr, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015).
3. David Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2023).
4. The fact that Nixon was deeply concerned with domestic politics must come as little surprise. But, as Thomas A. Schwartz has demonstrated, Kissinger shared this obsession. See Schwartz, *Henry Kissinger and American Power: A Political Biography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2020). And see also Bernd Greiner, *Henry Kissinger: Wächter des Imperiums* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2020).
5. On the incursion into Laos, see, e.g., Robert D. Sander, *Invasion of Laos 1971: Lam Son 719* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 62.

Keeping the Photographs on the Wall: Carolyn Woods Eisenberg on Nixon's Vietnam War

Amanda C. Demmer

On April 5, 1975, President Gerald Ford and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger met with a delegation that had just returned from a crumbling South Vietnam. This meeting is best known for the contents and consequences of a report delivered that day by Army Chief of Staff General Frederick C. Weyand. Weyand argued that South Vietnam "was on the brink of total military defeat" and required $722 million not to halt or reverse the rapidly advancing North Vietnamese offensive, but to establish "a strong defense perimeter around Saigon" and buy "vitally needed" time. Ford would request this vast sum of money from Congress five days later.

On April 5, the president also received a report from the White House photographer, Pulitzer Prize winner David Kennerly. Kennerly delivered a blunt verbal assessment of the situation in Vietnam and then, perhaps knowing a picture is worth a thousand words, also gave a visual dissertation about the chaos and suffering in Vietnam. Photograph after photograph depicted, in Kennerly's words, "refugee kids . . . wounded evacuees . . . [a] ship filled with fleeing South Vietnamese soldiers." Ford was evidently very moved by these images, as he ordered them displayed prominently in the West Wing. When he learned that someone had taken them down, presumably because of their graphic nature, the president demanded they be rehung so that his staff could, as the president put it, "know what's going on over there" and be reminded of the human stakes of their work.[1]

Carolyn Woods Eisenberg's *Fire and Rain* is a multifaceted, nuanced history. At its core, the book is a history of the Nixon administration's pursuit of the Vietnam War that forces its readers to keep the photographs on the wall, while showing that the president and his national security advisor refused to give them a passing glance. Impeccably researched, beautifully written, and relentlessly human, *Fire and Rain* will surprise experts and captivate students.

The book is filled with paradoxes. The first has to do with the almost larger-than-life quality that Nixon and Kissinger assume in the history of these years. On the one hand, Eisenberg's account adds even more ammunition to existing studies that show the paranoia, deception, and secrecy with which these two men operated and how they centralized and consolidated an immense amount of power in their own hands.[2]

At the same time, building on the insightful work of David Prentice, Eisenberg argues that Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird played a prominent role in the administration, especially early on. Laird won a key victory in securing Nixon's support for withdrawing U.S. troops ("Vietnamization") over Kissinger's and the military establishment's objections.[3] This success had a cost, however. Moving forward, Laird was a constant target of Kissinger's wrath, was often excluded from high-level discussions, and, having already spent his political capital, minimized or silenced his own dissent on other matters, often publicly supporting the administration even when he privately disagreed.

One of the advantages of Eisenberg's thriller-like prose and the length (519 pages) and detail of the book is that readers can see how Kissinger and Nixon increasingly isolated themselves in real time. From the outset, both men favored the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Creighton Abrams' Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and Colonel Al Haig, a Vietnam veteran who acted as Kissinger's deputy for military affairs (37–8). Nixon and Kissinger relied on the military over civilian voices and often excluded or bypassed the input of high-ranking civilian officials like Secretary of State William Rogers. This created a situation where even classified internal debates were "perfunctory" (238). Things eventually became so bad that even the Joint Chiefs resorted to "internal espionage" to get a sense of what was happening in the White House (348). By the fall of 1972, Eisenberg argues, the inner circle became so constricted that, for all intents and purposes, "three men [were] responsible for ending the war—Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig" (464).

One of the assets of Eisenberg's fine study, however, is that she refuses to play by Nixon and Kissinger's rules. The president's inner circle may have operated in an increasingly small echo chamber, but she insists on putting them in a broader context. By continually reminding readers about the voices Nixon and Kissinger refused to hear, the expertise they refused to call upon, and the experience they refused to consult, she illustrates the contingency of these years and illuminates many a possibility not pursued.

While Nixon and Kissinger were able to isolate themselves from and supersede much of the normal workings of U.S. bureaucracy, they were also some of the most visible men in the world. This is another key paradox of *Fire and Rain*: although intensely (self-)isolated, Nixon and Kissinger always operated in a larger context, one where there was no place to hide. With her repeated juxtapositions of these realities, Eisenberg reaffirms the importance of domestic politics to the conduct of U.S. foreign relations in vivid, relentless detail.

The antiwar movement and Congress are important players in these pages. *Fire and Rain's* contribution here lies not so much in unearthing sensational new research but in displaying the photographs taken either at home or abroad and refusing to take them down. Here Eisenberg's eye for detail and narrative shine. Her vivid descriptions of well-known events like the shootings at Kent State (161–66) are visceral. Lesser-known episodes, like the Justice Department barring disabled veterans in uniform and Gold Star mothers from entering the Mall in April 1971 (284), add context and human moments to the text. They also show Kissinger and especially Nixon's pervasive and paranoid obsession with the antiwar movement and their belief in the purported bias of media coverage (more on that in a moment).

Fire and Rain's coverage of Capitol Hill, like its coverage of the White House, reveals messy, often conflicted human beings who frequently acted in contradictory ways. There are moments where Eisenberg supports Andrew L. Johns's

argument that Congress did not merely cede control of decision-making to the administration, it was complicit in the United States' waging of the Vietnam War.[4] After Nixon's Silent Majority speech, Eisenberg explains, "Congress fell in line . . . and members who had intended to oppose him lost their nerve," a "collapse of will . . . so pronounced that the president felt confident enough to schedule an appearance before the House of Representatives, where he received a standing ovation" (93, 94).

Two years later, when the administration's plans were threatened by the Hatfield-McGovern amendment, which would have terminated appropriations for American troops in Vietnam after December 1971, Nixon once again went on the offensive. This time he proposed a "cease-fire-in-place" that sounded appealing but had zero chance of acceptance (203–4). Once again, Congress backpaddled in the face of the strong televised speech. This time congressional reaction was so strong that Kissinger gleefully informed the president that "senators were flocking to their side" (205). The amendment was defeated, 55–39.

Eisenberg argues, however, that to equate failure to pass amendments with failure to change the course of the war would be to miss the point. Repeated threats from Capitol Hill were a thorn in Nixon's side that he could not fully ignore. Here the author usefully distinguishes between the ground and air war. Congress failed rather spectacularly to rein in the air war, in part because it wasn't fully aware of its scope,[5] but Capitol Hill was very successful, *Fire and Rain* demonstrates, in curtailing ground operations by U.S. combat troops. "It was Senator McGovern and his antiwar colleagues in both houses of Congress who had forced Nixon to ultimately end American ground combat in Vietnam," she suggests, explaining that Nixon felt compelled to go with Laird's Vietnamization policy to quell popular unrest and keep members of Congress from opposing him outright. "Though almost none of the dozens of initiatives they drafted to end the war had passed, they put so much pressure on the White House that his administration had been compelled to keep withdrawing troops. Few people outside the government recognized how effective these pressures had been" (433).

One of the aspects of the book that I found most valuable is an intervention that Eisenberg does not explicitly address in her introduction or conclusion. Nevertheless, it is a main lens through which Americans understood and debated the Vietnam War: the media. *Fire and Rain* challenged and ultimately changed the way I think about the media's coverage of the war during the Nixon years. As anyone who has taught the Vietnam War in recent years probably knows, the belief that the media, especially TV coverage, presented the war in an unfairly critical way continues to hold sway. In contrast, orthodox scholars have argued that the press mostly subscribed to and upheld the Cold War consensus before the Tet Offensive shattered the optimism about the war that had been disseminated by the Johnson administration's Progress Campaign.[6] According to the defensively postured orthodox argument, after 1968 the media ultimately reflected widespread doubts about the wisdom of continuing the war, rather than propelled them.[7]

Eisenberg's account suggests that while Nixon and Kissinger certainly believed the press was out to get them, the news media's coverage could have been far more critical. If Nixon and Kissinger refused to look at the photographs, in many instances the press made it easier to look away. Some examples are familiar, including the My Lai massacre. "The media had all but ignored [the story] for the better part of a year," Eisenberg writes, noting "it was only Seymour Hersh's persistence that enabled it to be published." She adds that the public reaction against Lieutenant Calley's conviction "far exceeded any public outrage over the massacre itself" (105, 267).

Other descriptions Eisenberg offers come as a relative surprise, especially when considered collectively. With "brilliantly crafted speeches," she argues, Nixon was ultimately able, after an intense outpouring of opposition, to "control the narrative" (192) in response to the invasion of Cambodia. She also suggests that the coverage of the antiwar movement, especially veterans' involvement, was minimized. There were many protests on military bases in the United States, but "the mainstream media was paying scant attention" (220), and the January 1971 Winter Soldier hearings held in Detroit were "virtually unnoticed by the public" because of "lack of media coverage," despite organizers' attempts to get attention (226). Lieutenant John Kerry's eloquent, oft-cited testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee suffered a similar fate, as it was not "carried on national television" (288).

Eisenberg also argues that major moments and aspects of the Vietnam War often appeared as little more than a blip on the national media radar. Before the invasion of Laos (Operation Lam Son 719) took place there was a news embargo; and then, "taking the ban to preposterous lengths, the military embargoed the embargo by forbidding news outlets from informing their readers that censorship had been imposed" (244). Although "lifted one week later," this ban resulted in a "short-circuiting of public debate over the wisdom of invading Laos" (244). Eisenberg also suggests that the coverage of Operation Linebacker in 1972 was paltry, noting that "civilian damage inside North Vietnam was a nonevent. Coverage in the United States was sparse: some scattered articles in newspapers, almost none on television" (404).

Similarly, when the 1972 Republican National Convention descended into violence and there was "a prolonged battle" in which "the authorities clubbed and arrested demonstrators" (435), "the media covered almost none of it." The contrast between the coverage of the RNC in 1972 and the attention given to the violence outside the DNC four years earlier was stark. Despite similarities, the RNC was portrayed as "a unified, orderly gathering in celebration of a great president" (436). Taken collectively, the episodes noted here, and a variety of others, suggest that rather than being the unrelenting foe Nixon imagined, the media turned down many opportunities to criticize the White House.

The Richard Nixon who appears in *Fire and Rain* is malicious, deceptive, and callous, but he is also an undeniably brilliant storyteller and speechmaker (even though those narratives often involved bending the truth or telling outright lies). This was true both of his Vietnam-related addresses and his speeches about his administration's openings to China and the Soviet Union, which served as a PR coup for the administration. This is one of Eisenberg's larger arguments: that the "Vietnam problem increasingly shaped interactions with Moscow and Beijing," not the other way around (8). In other words, by the early 1970s, the president viewed the communist superpowers not as enemies—as reasons to continue the fighting (despite some speeches inflected with Cold War analogies)—but as potential allies in securing a face-saving exit from the Vietnam War.

The war in Vietnam certainly increased Nixon's appetite for positive press coverage, which the highly choreographed, ceremonial summits with communist superpowers provided in spades. The mere announcement of the trip to China took "Vietnam off the front pages" (278). The president's trip to China was *the* story, which created a hierarchy where mundane details about the China trip superseded coverage of the ongoing violence in Indochina. The summits also rehabilitated the administration's image and established Nixon's bona fides as a peacemaker, Eisenberg argues. "Journalists and politicians who had been lambasting his administration for months over its mishandling of the Vietnam War were rushing to praise

him." In the end, she writes, the China summit amounted to a "public relations windfall exceeding all expectations" (310, 371). This groundswell of galvanizing support was surpassed by reactions to the Moscow trip, which prompted an "enthusiastic response from the public, the press, and members of Congress in both parties" that "exceeded Nixon and Kissinger's expectations" (419).

Eisenberg suggests that selective coverage of the Vietnam War (which often took down the photographs or hung them in a back room) combined with front-page approbation about Nixon's détente policies to make the Vietnam War a second-tier story earlier than most of us think. All of this was enabled by the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops, which meant that fewer Americans were dying. Long gone were the days when *Life* magazine ran photos of each of the 241 Americans who died in a single week (63). By the fall of 1972, Eisenberg argues, "the war was disappearing from the front pages of most newspapers and receiving scant coverage on television news" (438).

Fire and Rain is a tour de force. It is sure to prompt further study of a variety of topics, and I especially look forward to seeing how future scholarship will engage with her descriptions of the relationships between the administration and the media. In addition, although the this book (or any other individual book) is unlikely to settle the lively scholarly debates about the Vietnam War, I do expect that Eisenberg's seminal study will help set the terms of the discussion. One of the book's key contributions is to challenge future scholars to keep the photographs on the wall—to put internal policy debates and their human consequences in conversation. As the events of the Vietnam War are no longer within living memory of the majority of people in the United States, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, this approach to history is more vital than ever.

Notes:
1. These events and their reverberations are described in Amanda C. Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall, Refugees and U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, 1975–2000* (Cambridge, UK, 2021), 32–34.
2. On this topic see Bob Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York, 2018).
3. David L. Prentice, "Choosing 'the Long Road': Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, Vietnamization, and the War over Nixon's Vietnam Strategy," *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (2016): 445–74.
4. Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (Lexington, KY, 2010).
5. Operation Menu, the fourteen-month secret bombing of Cambodia that began in March of 1969, was not revealed to Congress until July 1973. Eisenberg discusses the planning of the operation and its shocking revelation (41, 47, 512).
6. Chester Pach, "'We Need to Get a Better Story to the American People': LBJ, the Progress Campaign, and the Vietnam War on Television," in *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century*, eds. Kenneth Osgood and Andrew K. Frank (Gainesville, FL, 2010), 170–95.
7. See Gary R. Hess, "The Media and the War: Irresponsible or Balanced Journalism?" in *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, ed. Gary R. Hess, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ, 2015), 133–54.

Review of Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*

Addison Jensen

In 1969, shortly after becoming Richard Nixon's national security advisor, Henry Kissinger received some unsolicited advice from none other than Daniel Ellsberg, the future whistleblower behind the leak of the infamous Pentagon Papers. At the time, Ellsberg was working as an analyst for the RAND Corporation, but the two men had become acquainted during their years at Harvard. In a piece of advice that would prove prescient, Ellsberg warned Kissinger of the pitfalls that accompanied the immense power, high security clearances, and abundance of "Top Secret" information given to the national security advisor. The danger, Ellsberg cautioned, would be the temptation to listen exclusively to other top-level elites while ignoring the views of individuals on the ground level who lacked such clearances. In the end, he warned, "you'll become something like a moron. You'll become incapable of learning from most people in the world, no matter how much experience they may have in their particular areas that may be much greater than yours" (242).

Ellsberg's advice was sound. But when it came to the United States' policies during the Vietnam War, it ultimately went unheeded by both Kissinger and Nixon—a fact made evident in Carolyn Woods Eisenberg's impressive work, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*. Eisenberg assigns herself the formidable task of chronicling Nixon and Kissinger's policies during the Vietnam War *and* their resulting diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China. The overarching question of the book is simple but challenging. "How," Eisenberg asks, "can leaders of a democracy conduct an extended war on behalf of a repressive, unpopular regime [the Republic of Vietnam] when the human costs are enormous and defeat seems likely?" (14).

There is no single answer to this question. A variety of factors—including the need to demonstrate U.S. "credibility," Nixon and Kissinger's personalities, and the willingness of the national security bureaucracy to rely on military power—all provide insight into Eisenberg's query. But one important explanation can be linked to Ellsberg's 1969 warning to Kissinger. Though standard narratives of the Vietnam War tend to emphasize the intellectual errors made by "the best and the brightest" of Washington's policymakers in the Johnson and Nixon administrations, Eisenberg rejects this formulation. In examining U.S. policy, she argues, the key is to understand that the tragedy of the Vietnam War was "less a failure of intellect than the selective vision of people in power" (12)—the ability of top officials to engage in self-deception to justify their goals, while ignoring perspectives that challenged their opinions.

The objective of the book is therefore twofold: "to describe and explain the policy choices that were made" by the Nixon administration, and to "consider the impact of these choices on the lives of particular people" (12). A lofty goal, but one that is deftly handled by Eisenberg, who draws on thousands of recently declassified materials—including transcripts from Kissinger's telephone calls and the Nixon presidential tapes—to tell this story.

Unsurprisingly, Eisenberg's account focuses mainly on Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. But one of her underlying motivations for undertaking this project was to shine a light on other individuals involved in the decision-making process and to situate "Nixon and Kissinger within the wider context of the people, the social and political institutions, the prevailing ideology, and the existing practices that framed their decision-making" (8). The two men, Eisenberg reminds her readers, were not empowered to act alone. Their policymaking often reflected the views of other top-level members of the national security bureaucracy—just the sort of individuals Ellsberg had cautioned Kissinger to avoid relying on exclusively. While Nixon and Kissinger, especially in the early years of their administration, leaned heavily on the opinions of career military men such as the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), Eisenberg also draws attention to two other sources of influence.

Both the organized peace movement and public opinion (often expressed through congressional activity) limited the options available to Nixon as he unsuccessfully waged war

in Vietnam. A central, if camouflaged, antiwarrior was none other than Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. Up until this point, and with the notable exceptions of Dale Van Atta's book, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (2008), and David Prentice's upcoming book, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam* (2023), Laird has occupied a secondary position in scholarship centered on Vietnam War era foreign policy. *Fire and Rain* elevates Laird to a leading role by arguing that the secretary of defense played a pivotal part in advocating for U.S. troop withdrawals.

Despite his public-facing appearance as a hawk, Laird often privately disagreed with Nixon and Kissinger's policy decisions—particularly those related to the expansion of the war in Cambodia and Laos. Publicly, however, Laird defended the administration's decisions to Congress while working tirelessly behind the scenes to advance his policy of "Vietnamization"—a strategy aimed at gradually bringing American troops home and replacing them with South Vietnamese forces. This approach put Laird at loggerheads with Kissinger and other top military officials, who viewed the American military's presence in Vietnam as the most powerful incentive for the North Vietnamese to negotiate and thus judged Vietnamization a mistake.

Nevertheless, between 1969 and the fall of 1972, Laird succeeded in bringing home tens of thousands of American combat troops. He was helped along in this endeavor by Nixon, who, unlike Kissinger, saw the value of troop withdrawals. While it is true that the president escalated the war in Cambodia and Laos in an attempt to force Hanoi to the negotiating table, Nixon also maintained a close awareness of how long the public (Congress, the peace movement, and the "silent majority") would be willing to tolerate what seemed to be a never-ending war. For Nixon, Vietnamization played a crucial role in both combating the antiwar movement and pacifying a Congress that had shown itself increasingly reluctant to fund the war (the Cooper-Church and Case-Church amendments are just two of the antiwar congressional measures explored by Eisenberg).

The book is divided into two parts, which chronicle Nixon and Kissinger's policies before and after the spring of 1971, a moment Eisenberg identifies as a commonly overlooked turning point in the war. In part 1, "The War," Eisenberg focuses heavily on the Nixon administration's policy of Vietnamization and its decision to expand the war into Cambodia and Laos. The policy culminated in Lam Son 719—a South Vietnamese offensive into Laos in February and March 1971.

While the campaign aimed to cut off North Vietnamese access to the Ho Chi Minh Trail (and thus, Nixon and Kissinger hoped, forestall a future enemy offensive), the operation ended in failure. With only the support of U.S. air power, the South Vietnamese troops were overrun. The sight of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) hastily retreating from the battlefield seemed to undermine the Nixon administration's claims that Vietnamization was working. Compounding the failure of Vietnamization—while simultaneously reinforcing the urgency of troop removals—was the emergence of a new faction of the antiwar movement, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).

By June 1971, it had become clear to Nixon and Kissinger that their Vietnam policies were failing. It was time to focus their energies on a different approach, one that necessitated the assistance of the United States' adversaries, the Soviet Union (USSR) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Eisenberg turns her attention to these efforts in part 2, "War and Diplomacy." Covering the period between June of 1971 and the Paris Peace Agreements in January 1973, the second half of *Fire and Rain* chronicles Nixon and Kissinger's repeated attempts to enlist the USSR and China in their quest to achieve "peace with honor" by extricating the United States from the war. Here, Eisenberg puts forth another assertion that is at odds with traditional accounts, "which assume that US military actions in Southeast Asia were the consequence of Cold War fears of the communist 'superpowers'" (8).

While Eisenberg acknowledges that the Nixon administration's early decision-making related to the Vietnam War was motivated by concerns about the Soviet Union and China, this explanation rings hollow for the post-1968 years. During that period, she argues, the exact opposite was true: instead of seeing U.S. involvement in Vietnam as an answer to the threat of Chinese or Soviet aggression, Nixon and Kissinger increasingly viewed China and the Soviet Union as possible solutions to their troubles in the country. Perhaps the communist superpowers could encourage Hanoi to come to the bargaining table. As a result, the two men made sizeable concessions on such important issues as arms control (the USSR) and the United States' relationship with Taiwan (China).

The irony of this approach, Eisenberg points out, is astounding. For years, American politicians had justified their escalating policies in Vietnam by arguing that the war was just one front in the global battle against communism. Yet by 1972, Nixon and Kissinger appeared downright friendly with both of their former opponents. Ultimately, their attempts at détente yielded little in the way of favorable negotiations with the North Vietnamese. In fact, the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement looked very similar to the agreement outlined in the 1969 negotiations. Even the Christmas Bombings of 1972, intended to cow the North Vietnamese into submission, failed to change the terms of the negotiations.

In the end, the Paris Peace Agreement was essentially the same as a deal reached in October 1972, prior to the bombings. The Paris Agreement's chief provisions were a ceasefire in place, an agreement to "withdraw all foreign troops from South Vietnam," and the return of all American prisoners of war (POWs). Undermining the Nixon administration's repeated claims that the United States was in Vietnam to preserve democracy, the final agreement left the fate of South Vietnam undecided. Instead, a "National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord" was established to organize the election of a new South Vietnamese government (492).

Nixon and Kissinger failed to leverage their relationship with the USSR and China into a favorable compromise with Hanoi. Politically, however, their triumphant and historic visits to China (in February 1972) and the Soviet Union (in May 1972) were a success, allowing both men to position themselves as peacemakers and international statesmen and gaining them the approbation of the American public. Unfortunately, their dealings with the Soviet Union and China entailed such significant concessions that the two men often preferred to operate on their own—bypassing Congress, State Department officials (including Secretary of State William Rogers), and U.S. ambassadors in their maneuverings. By cutting nearly everyone out of the decision-making process, Nixon and Kissinger were, in Eisenberg's words, "actively overturning some of the chief safeguards of democratic governance without so much as a backward glance" (369).

But it was not merely top-level officials whose opinions were ignored (or rather, unsolicited). Time after time, Nixon, Kissinger, and a host of other officials within the national security bureaucracy turned a blind eye to the impact their policies were having on the ground—on Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian civilians; American troops and aid workers; journalists; and even Vietnam's environment. Operations such as the 1969 bombing campaign in Cambodia ("Operation Menu," with individual components designated "Breakfast," "Lunch," "Dinner,"

"Snack," and so forth) were given names that showed a callous disregard for the heavy toll the bombings took on civilian populations.

Eisenberg recounts one particularly shocking story about Kissinger's reaction to the release of photos documenting the March 1968 My Lai massacre. At Nixon's request, Kissinger had phoned Laird to strategize about how best to limit the negative publicity that was sure to follow the news of the massacre. The photos, Laird admitted, were "pretty terrible." Kissinger, it turned out, had yet to look at them. "Should I?" he asked (103). This brief anecdote offers a shocking reminder of the stunning levels of detachment present among the top officials of the Nixon administration. "Not seeing or learning about discomforting realities," Eisenberg comments, "was often the prerequisite for career advancement" (12).

While Nixon, Kissinger, and other members of the bureaucracy may have chosen to overlook the experiences of individuals who were witnessing the war firsthand, Eisenberg is determined to bring these voices to the fore. Among the many commendable qualities of *Fire and Rain* is the way the author skillfully blends traditional top-down diplomatic history with a bottom-up approach that emphasizes the human consequences of decisions made at the highest levels of the U.S. government. In addition to combing through a veritable avalanche of recently declassified government documents, Eisenberg weaves the voices of everyday people into her narrative. *Fire and Rain* makes ample use of memoirs, news reports, magazine articles, documents from civilian-run organizations, and interviews to remind her readers of the human costs of the sterile policy decisions made by the Nixon administration.

Included in these accounts are the stories of Ron Kovic (a Vietnam veteran who was paralyzed in the war and subsequently joined the VVAW peace movement), Kim Phuc (a nine-year-old Vietnamese girl who was photographed running naked down a road after being burned in a napalm attack by the South Vietnamese Air Force), and students from Kent State University. Each perspective buttresses Eisenberg's claim that a complete understanding of U.S. policy during the war is possible only if we also consider the impact of these decisions on people's lives.

If there is one shortcoming of this work, it is the notable absence of the perspectives of South Vietnamese soldiers. Throughout *Fire and Rain*, the reader is repeatedly asked to consider how the Nixon administration allowed the United States to remain in the quagmire that Vietnam had become. Given the high levels of casualties and the unpopularity of the South Vietnamese government, how did the United States justify its decision to remain at war? One of the official answers to this query, of course, was that the American government was committed to preserving the democracy of the freedom-loving people of South Vietnam. Yet the voices of ARVN soldiers—the very people tasked with shouldering the bulk of the fighting, particularly as the policy of Vietnamization was implemented—are barely present in *Fire and Rain*.

For example, in chapter 14 of the book ("Take a Stinking Hill"), Eisenberg provides her readers with a detailed accounting of the failed Lam Son 719 campaign. While the chapter includes the perspectives of Nixon, Kissinger, President Thieu, military officials, American troops, and journalists, only one ARVN soldier is quoted in the chapter, leaving the reader to wonder how South Vietnamese soldiers felt about the mission, their Americans sponsors, the policy of Vietnamization, the South Vietnamese government, and the war itself.

By omitting the experiences of the ARVN military, *Fire and Rain* allows the opinions of Nixon, Kissinger, and other military officials to dictate the reader's view of ARVN troops. These American actors held South Vietnamese soldiers in low regard, viewing them as lazy, inept, cowardly, and overly reliant on the American military. Such characterizations relegate South Vietnamese soldiers to mere pawns in a chess match between the North Vietnamese and the United States, thereby stripping them of their agency in shaping the war experience. In recent years, works such as Robert K. Brigham's *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (2006) and a host of memoirs written by ARVN veterans have helped to correct this imbalance, but *Fire and Rain* is overwhelmingly dominated by the voices of Americans.

That objection aside, Eisenberg has provided historians with an impressive piece of scholarship—one that draws attention to the ways in which policymakers selectively listened to some voices, ignored others, and in the case of Nixon and Kissinger, repeatedly circumvented the Constitution by depriving the American people of the right to contribute to policymaking decisions. *Fire and Rain* is a thought-provoking book. By blending an examination of policy with a consideration of its impact on human lives, Eisenberg has provided a fresh perspective on the Vietnam War while offering sage advice to future decision-makers.

Review of Carolyn Woods Eisenberg. *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia*

P. Mike Rattanasengchanh

This is a lengthy book that endeavors to explain the many nuances of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's approach to the war in Southeast Asia. Carolyn Woods Eisenberg brings together many events and actors to create a narrative explaining that Nixon and Kissinger's foreign policymaking process was based more on the "selective vision of people in power"—in this case, theirs, rather than "the consequence of Cold War fears of the communist 'superpowers'" (12, 8).

The book is divided into two sections. The first is focused on Nixon and Kissinger's use of the battlefield as another form of diplomacy to force Hanoi to concede to U.S. demands. They failed, producing only more death and destruction. Domestic politics also played a role in the administration's strategy, as Eisenberg shows that the home front placed constraints on "presidential decision-making" (9). However, Nixon found the right words and emphasized the right events to maintain some support and popularity.

The second section of the book shows Nixon and Kissinger's lack of interpersonal awareness. Eisenberg provides ample evidence that Nixon and Kissinger were oftentimes aloof and misjudged other leaders and peoples. Ideas that they had mulled over in countless meetings and that were at the heart of many backchannel agreements rarely produced the desired outcomes the two men had envisioned. Eisenberg also demonstrates in this section that the real tragedy of Nixon's administration is that his role in the Watergate scandal received more attention from the House Judiciary Committee than the Vietnam War's devastating impact on the lives of Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Lao did. Southeast Asia was an arena for Nixon and Kissinger to play their political games in order to save both of their and America's images, not to bring peace.

Part 1 of the book begins by unpacking the ambiguity of Nixon's presidential campaign slogan about ending the Vietnam War with "peace and honor." What the Nixon administration actually tried to do was devise a way for the United States to end the war without losing face. American involvement in the war would be phased out via Vietnamization, which called for the incremental withdrawal of U.S. ground troops and expanded efforts to help Saigon learn to fight for itself.

Another way to help the South Vietnamese government was to expand the war into Cambodia to rid enemy

sanctuaries and thus create some semblance of security for Saigon. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, often ignored by Nixon, and Secretary of State William Rogers expressed hesitation about this plan because of possible domestic backlash. The move also seemed to contradict the administration's claim to want peace and an end to the fighting. Eisenberg provides examples of Laird and others who disagreed with Nixon being sidelined. Nevertheless, Laird remained a "team player" until the end (499).

The concerns that Laird and Rogers had expressed proved justified when news broke about the invasion. Americans demanded to know why Nixon had expanded the war to Cambodia and why U.S. soldiers were still dying in Southeast Asia. Anti-war protests spread, pushing Nixon to accelerate the removal of troops. However, the violence did not stop, and Nixon continued secretly bombing Cambodia in hopes of destroying Hanoi's military options in the south and of gaining the upper hand at the negotiation table.

Nixon and Kissinger's next desperate move to salvage American prestige and extricate the nation from Vietnam on their own terms was to help Saigon invade Laos. There were pressures on the domestic front for a deadline to remove all U.S. troops and broker a peace agreement with Hanoi. Washington wanted to show that Saigon could conduct a campaign by itself, and the incursion into Laos, referred to as Operation Lam Son 719, was a possible answer. The United States had been bombing Laos since 1964. Prior to that, the Central Intelligence Agency worked with the Hmong in a secret war. The goal of Lam Son 719 was to interdict the Ho Chi Minh trail near Tchepone in southern Laos so as to halt supplies and manpower coming from the north.

Eisenberg goes into great depth about the planning for and conduct of this operation and shows how badly Nixon and Kissinger wanted Lam Son 719 to work. Unfortunately, it was a disaster, with South Vietnamese troops retreating in disarray. Some Americans were also confused about why the fighting had expanded. The United States was supposed to be ending the war and bringing peace to Vietnam. Anti-war protests increased across college campuses, as they had after the Cambodian incursion. Washington withdrew U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, but the bombing of Laos persisted, just as the bombing of Cambodia did.

Somehow, Nixon was able to win-over some of the American public. Eisenberg describes how the President used his oratory skills to sell his Vietnam policies. She cites the "silent majority" address, describing it as "by far the most brilliantly executed speech that Nixon had ever given" (92). Instead of promoting immediate peace in Vietnam, the president used the occasion to try to convince supporters that only he could bring "a just peace" (91). Similarly, Nixon used an address that was supposed to set the stage for his secret plan for Cambodia to praise America's superior morality, even though his intent to bring more destruction to the region. Eisenberg calls the speech "disingenuous." Some of his best speaking performances took place when he was promoting his meetings with the Soviets and Chinese, where he portrayed himself as a peace-maker. Eisenberg cites favorable polls and positive comments from officials and politicians in reaction to Nixon's speeches as indication of his success. Even some policymakers who opposed Nixon's actions reluctantly supported him.

Part 2 of the book delves into the diplomatic side of Nixon and Kissinger's policies. Between dealing with battlefield issues and domestic upheavals, both men met with the Soviets and Chinese. Their strategy was to try to use the two communist nations to pressure Hanoi to concede to some of Washington's demands.

America's rapprochement with these countries was ground breaking. Eisenberg's treatment of Nixon and Kissinger relations with the Soviets is one of the more novel parts of her book. Like China, the two men thought, Moscow could have some influence in making Hanoi more amenable to U.S. peace proposals, especially since the Soviets were the chief military suppliers to North Vietnam. Nixon chose this time to introduce the idea of linkage. When engaging with other nations, he told the Soviets, the United States and the Soviet Union should "do what we can in a parallel way to defuse critical situations such as the Middle East and Vietnam" (44). Kissinger, for his part, dangled the carrot of improved relations and reduced arms productions as incentives. These offers lessened tensions somewhat between the two nations, but they failed to sway North Vietnam. Both men misjudged the Chinese and Soviet hold over Hanoi. Vietnamese leaders remembered being bullied by the two communist powers in 1954, making them obstinate to demands from Beijing and Moscow (46, 89).

Nixon and Kissinger's consternation at the North Vietnamese response to their proposals was not out of character. Eisenberg describes how both men were often disconcerted when a leader did not acquiesce to their overtures or a situation did not turn out the way they planned. And it would not always be in the realm of big power relations that they exhibited judgment errors. Eisenberg points to instances where they misunderstood the American public, the North Vietnamese, and Congress. Both Nixon and Kissinger seemed unable to fathom that others could think differently from them. They were in their own world.

Eisenberg successfully links the decisions of Nixon and Kissinger to negative results for the Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Lao people. The book draws in statistics of the approximate death counts and the enormous amount of ordnance used on these countries and includes descriptive accounts of wounded adults and children. Air power became the only tool left for Nixon and Kissinger to use, as they thought it would lead Hanoi to change its mind. However, it only brought more unnecessary suffering. In Laos, for example, tens of thousands of civilians were killed or wounded. The U.S. invasion of Cambodia destabilized the country and gave the Khmer Rouge room to grow. In March of 1972, the North Vietnamese launched a large offensive. In response, Nixon initiated massive air operations, bombing both the north and south. Kissinger cabled the president calling the bombings "'absolutely awe inspiring'" and assured Nixon that they were "'really punishing these people, believe me'" (423). Military targets were the focus, but as Eisenberg states, "this phase of the American air war was hurting civilians in the South…" (423). Congress eventually found out about the secret bombings in Cambodia, which lasted for fourteen months in 1969 and 1970. This discovery spurred calls for impeachment, but for some reason the House Judiciary Committee left Cambodia (and Laos) out of their investigations.

Eventually, the United States chose to wash its hands clean, even though doing so meant forcing its ally, Nguyen Van Thieu, to accept unfair terms. Eisenberg shares some of Thieu's laments at being easily disregarded, "The Americans let the war become their war…. When they want to stop it, they impose on both sides to stop it" (496).

The book ends with a look at Southeast Asia post-1973. The Geneva Accords had some big question marks for Vietnam, but it lacked even more specificity regarding Laos and Cambodia (505). Violence continued in both countries because of domestic rivalries and U.S. intervention. The suffering lasted longer than necessary. Nixon and Kissinger's desires were less about "peace with honor" and more about their vision of wanting to end the war on terms that suited them and not the American, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Lao people.

This book covers a lot of topics, people, and events, and in some ways, it reads like a synthesis of other narratives from the historiographies of Nixon and Kissinger, U.S.

diplomatic history, and the Vietnam War. Eisenberg provides context to Nixon and Kissinger's Vietnam policies, and she had a lot of ground to cover. First, she examines the international scene showing the Soviet and Chinese role in foreign policymaking. Second, we see domestic politics intersecting with foreign, as protests and congressional action constrained the White House to some extent from the beginning and then more so by 1973. However, Nixon still had a sizable following that gave him some confidence that what he was doing in Vietnam was right. Third, the book delves us into the fractured relationships within the White House. Nixon and Kissinger insulated themselves, ignoring opposing and more realistic views.

Lastly and most importantly, Eisenberg gives us a glimpse into the rationale of the president and his national security advisor (and later secretary of state) when it came to foreign policy. Both men were shrewd and saw the world through a realist lens, basing policy on self-interest and not Cold War ideology. At the same time, their policies seemed to emanate more from what they perceived to be right or what they thought others should be thinking, and all too often their actions often led to more confusion and ruin.

Fire and Rain is a very long examination of two men and how they engaged in foreign policy. The strength of the book is that it is an almost comprehensive study of Nixon and Kissinger's plan for Southeast Asia and shows the complications of the Vietnam War and the people involved. We see the many influences and factors that shaped foreign policymaking and the opinions of the leaders who engaged in it. It was interesting to learn how two leaders thought they could use what seemed like unlimited power to force their ideas and will on others.

Much of the information and arguments in Eisenberg's book can be found in other scholarly works on U.S. foreign relations and the Vietnam War. *Fire and Rain* brings many of them into one integrated narrative centered on Nixon and Kissinger. Those who are unfamiliar with Nixon's Vietnam policy will get a good in-depth overview. Eisenberg frames both men's decision-making process as part of their own "selective vision" (12). They turned away from the old Cold War ideology, but from the sources in the book, readers may conclude that their actions could be explained as part of détente, which is barely mentioned. Détente was supposed to relieve superpower tensions so Nixon and Kissinger could maneuver, like in Vietnam.

Is Eisenberg's book another way of looking at détente and its flaws? Détente was supposed to ease tensions with the Soviets and allow for more foreign policy mobility for the White House. She gives plenty of evidence against Nixon as there is a strong connection between the administration's decisions and the deaths of hundreds of thousands in Southeast Asia. Nixon and his associates were deep in legal troubles because of Watergate, but Article IV—the article that accused the president of deceiving Congress by misleading and downright false testimony concerning American military operations—could have implicated the president and Kissinger in larger problems beyond domestic. Détente enabled the president to engage in policies that served his own interests and made the nation's involvement in Southeast Asia more destructive without the fear of drawing in the Soviet Union and China.

Author's reply

Carolyn Eisenberg

Book reviews, whether written or spoken, can offer invaluable insights into themes and concepts that may not have come across as clearly in the manuscript as the author intended. I am, therefore, especially appreciative of the detailed reviews provided by historians such as Amanda C. Demmer and Addison Jensen, who amplify certain features of my book that have attracted less attention despite their intended significance.

Situating Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in a wider context posed one major challenge for me in constructing a narrative. On the one hand, these larger-than-life figures were "the deciders" — often the first and last two people to advance and settle U.S. foreign policy. On the other hand, they were responding to diverse domestic and global pressures, the balance of which shifted over time.

Both men made their careers by conforming to Cold War orthodoxy and cultivating its practitioners. Upon entering the White House, their early decisions reflected the pressures from the "national security" bureaucracies, especially the military. As Addison Jensen reflects, it is the "selective vision" associated with these entities organizations that proved so detrimental.

That "selective vision" encompassed not only specific ideas, but a language, a set of norms, and a way of functioning that limited what options would emerge at the top that they could see. By the time Nixon and Kissinger had completed their first year in office, more than 11,000 U.S. soldiers had died, Cambodia had become a more dangerous place, and the situation in South Vietnam was not significantly improved, pacification charts notwithstanding.

Against this backdrop, the American peace movement was continuing to grow as exemplified by the October 1969 Moratorium, which involved millions of people across the country participating in a wide range of non-violent activities. As the reviewers note, I devote considerable attention to this movement, not simply its presence but its impact on policy.

In thinking about the peace movement, I want to elaborate on a point which may not have emerged with sufficient clarity: the pivotal position of Nixon's Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. Nixon chose him for this position because of his extensive experience as a Republican leader in Congress. As politicians Laird, along with many of his peers, were keenly attuned to public opinion, including the power of the protest movement among civilians and increasingly within the military.

Responding to that pressure, Laird was a constant advocate for troop reduction throughout the entire four years of Nixon's first term. On this issue, he reflected the growing disillusion about the war on Capitol Hill. Historians have tended to underestimate that sentiment among members of Congress because resolutions cutting off funding for the war repeatedly failed. But at times formal votes can obscure strong attitudes, which are expressed in various forms of policymaking and influence.

Both reviewers, Demmer and Jensen, note the increasing isolation of Nixon and Kissinger from the relevant executive bodies, including career military leaders. This estrangement evolved over time, producing a distinctive mindset. A major factor was Nixon's need to be re-elected, which by the third year was driving key decisions. Because the election of 1972 was a landslide for Nixon in the end, it is easy to forget how challenging the situation appeared to him the year before. Indeed, fearing a 1972 North Vietnamese offensive, Nixon was mindful of how Lyndon Johnson's popularity diminished in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive.

By mid-summer 1971, Nixon faced an impatient electorate, a dwindling amount of ground troops, and a perceived corrupt, timid South Vietnamese Army. As election day approached, he and Kissinger worried about what they would have to show for the sacrifice of so many young Americans. Out of that dilemma, they became even more secretive and dishonest than before. In her review, Jensen gives welcome attention to Nixon's and Kissinger's diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China. Indeed, when I began reading the declassified transcripts of those conversations from early 1971 on, I was amazed by how

these old Cold Warriors were so assiduously cultivating the communist leadership of their ostensible foes, not just in words, but in promises and concessions on key issues.

There is no single explanation for this about-face. However, as discussed in my book, the need for dramatic achievements to overshadow their costly failures in Southeast Asia was a critical factor. Furthermore, they harbored fresh hope to enlist Soviet and Chinese help in obtaining North Vietnamese acquiescence in a peace agreement, an achievement that might yet appear as a qualified success to war-weary Americans. Some of that assistance from Moscow and Beijing did materialize. However, the final peace accords, signed in January 1973, left the South Vietnamese regime in peril. While the US finished bringing American troops home, the army of North Vietnam and their NLF allies could remain in place, operating in the South. Kissinger himself doubted that the Thiệu government would last more than two years against the onslaught.

The most significant criticism Addison Jensen offers is that "the voices of ARVN soldiers — the very people tasked with shouldering the bulk of the fighting, particularly as the policy of Vietnamization was implemented — are hardly present in *Fire and Rain*." It is a fair point. My lack of knowledge of the Vietnamese language, and a tendency to rely so heavily on primary sources written in English, limited the voices of soldiers in South Vietnam.From the outset of my project, I wanted to integrate the study of high policy with events on the ground. As a professor, I had come to appreciate how the study of high-level policy, which did not convey the impact of those choices on living and breathing people, lacked meaning. However, in making these connections, I came to appreciate how this indifference to human costs partly explained why Nixon, Kissinger, and their colleagues so frequently miscalculated.

In her generous review, Demmer forefronts this aspect of the book: "By continually reminding readers about the voices Nixon and Kissinger refused to hear, the expertise they refused to call upon, and the experience they refused to consult, (the author) illustrates the contingency of these years and illuminates many a policy not pursued."

The third reviewer Dr. Mike Rattanasengchanh restates some of the main points of the book,while sidestepping the analytical issues. In one instance, he misunderstands my perspective. In my view, the problem was not that Nixon and Kissinger lacked "interpersonal awareness," although this was arguably a Nixon flaw. The relevant deficit, I believe, was their lack of concern, interest, or sensitivity to entire categories of people.

Rattanasengchanh usefully calls attention to the events in Laos, providing brief historical background for Operation Lam Son 719, an almost forgotten military campaign during February-March 1971. In that effort, thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers, operating for the first time without U.S. help on the ground, crossed into Laos heading for the cross-roads town of Tchepone. This was less "a desperate plan …to salvage American prestige," than a narrowly defined attempt to cut off the flow of North Vietnamese manpower and supplies into the South. At a time when U.S. airpower was still available to assist the ARVN, General Creighton Abrams and his colleagues were optimistic, believing that a successful mission would prevent a North Vietnamese offensive over the next year. However, for this to occur, South Vietnamese troops would need to keep fighting in the area for at least two months.

Unfortunately, for Nixon and Kissinger, the South Vietnamese military proved less competent than anticipated. After a slow advance to Tchepone — facilitated by U.S. helicopters — the Thiệu government shockingly ordered a retreat.Contrary to expectations, there were tens of thousands of North Vietnamese troops in the area, which were inflicting major casualties. President Thiệu considered the political price too high. The net result for the Nixon administration was a public relations disaster, as millions of American saw on the news the spectacle of fleeing South Vietnamese soldiers clinging to the skids of U.S. airplanes.

For Nixon, Kissinger, and much of the news media, Lam Son 719 was a moment of truth — illuminating the fact that despite millions of dollars spent on weapons and training, the South Vietnamese military could not readily stand on its own. During the next eighteen months, for Richard Nixon, "damage control" remained an overriding imperative. However, in that enterprise, he was paradoxically assisted by decisions he had made in warding off the peace movement.

Though the steady removal of U.S. ground troops weakened the position of South Vietnam on the battlefield, it was a great boon for the president politically. In the run-up to the presidential election of 1972, George McGovern defined himself as the "peace candidate." Yet national polls showed that most Americans had more faith in Nixon's ability to end the war. To antiwar activists, this seemed absurd and provided clear evidence that the American public was, in their eyes, truly gullible. But this criticism of the president overlooked an important factor driving Nixon's showing in the polls: by November 1972, Richard Nixon had brought most U.S. troops home.

In early 1973, as the U.S. troops came home and the prisoners returned, it seemed almost certain that the Vietnam experience had taught the country some valuable lessons. Yet fifty years later, we continue to grapple with lessons learned or forgotten in applying U.S. foreign policy. There has never been a proper reckoning of the enormous civilian suffering, the United States inflicted upon the civilians of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. And associated with that lack of accountability, was the failure to recognize the dangers of an overly militarized national security state, or to make necessary change.