



Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam by Robert K. Brigham.

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“Hubris, thy name is Henry Kissinger” could serve as an epigraph for this new book, in which historian Robert Brigham¹ (Vassar College) discusses Kissinger’s secret negotiations in Paris (1969–73) using a wide range of primary (including Vietnamese) sources. *Reckless* exposes the delusions, manipulations, and outright lies that Kissinger used in pursuing an agreement that would end US participation in the Vietnam War and establish his reputation as a world-class diplomat. The “tragedy,” Brigham argues, was that Kissinger ended American involvement in the war, but on Hanoi’s terms, tacitly accepting the overthrow of US allies in Saigon. Worse, that agreement could have been reached months—or years—earlier, saving thousands of Vietnamese and American lives, had Kissinger been more effective. The author maintains that this failure remains dimly understood because of his subject’s distortions of the public record (93, 95).

Reckless shows that Kissinger believed “the only answer to the Vietnam riddle was military escalation” (70), and that he alone could carry out such a strategy because “he alone understood the ‘connections and motivations that linked far-flung events.’ ... He recklessly sought ends beyond his mean[s]” (46, 244). Brigham claims he is “the first to hold ... [Kissinger’s] record to a scrupulous account, [using] evidence provided by recently released material ... [to] analyze the cumulative effect of Kissinger’s strategic and diplomatic failures on the final peace agreement” (xi, xii).

Brigham’s portrait of Kissinger is reminiscent of Machiavelli. Since he and Nixon had not been close, he was surprised to be offered the position of National Security Advisor. Nevertheless, the two men shared the goal of concentrating foreign policy authority in the White House. Seeing the formal negotiations in Paris as window dressing, Kissinger advocated secret meetings with the North Vietnamese. Despite his European background, he saw himself as the quintessential American hero: “Americans admire the cowboy leading the caravan alone astride his horse” (43; “caravan”? “astride”?). The ambitious Kissinger hoped to be associated with Nixon’s plan to ease the Cold War by improving relations with China and Russia. Brigham shows that his solo diplomacy largely cut the State and Defense Departments out of policy making. Kissinger saw Secretary of State William Rogers as a lightweight and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird as a dangerous advocate of an alternate policy: Vietnamization. He carried out a “relentless assault” on both men (80). Keeping his cards close to the vest, “he did not share his Paris talking points with the State or the Defense Department” (201), even regarding possible military escalation. Espionage between “colleagues” became commonplace; Laird had Kissinger tapes! (74).

It fell to Kissinger to manage an often-skittish Nixon, alternately “fawning” over him and (figuratively!) holding his hand to steady his nerves; he sometimes even “deliberately misled him” on the state of negotiations (80, 90, 98, 231, 240). Brigham details the high costs of the administration’s astonishing dysfunction.

1. His earlier work includes *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2006).

The author homes in on the limitations of Kissinger's negotiating strategy. The National Security Advisor, believing—even after years of war—that aggressive military actions would compel the North Vietnamese and their southern allies to make concessions, was bent on threatening their “sanctuaries” in Cambodia and Laos and removing restrictions on bombing North Vietnamese cities. He believed massive bombing could offset the rapid drawdown of American combat troops stipulated by the Laird/Nixon policy of Vietnamization. Of course, more explosives failed to quell North Vietnam's aspirations for the national unity they had sacrificed so much for and believed to be nearing realization.

Kissinger's efforts to bring Russian and Chinese pressure to bear on North Vietnam also failed. Neither possessed the influence he imagined or relished supporting the United States against a fellow communist state. For a seasoned historian and scholar of international relations, Kissinger showed a surprising ignorance of the psychology and objectives of other peoples and nations. In short, “the Harvard professor who championed realism and linkage did not understand the basic political needs of his major adversary” (55).

Brigham stresses how little Kissinger and Nixon grasped the motivations of the Vietnamese people. Indeed, they showed no respect whatever for US allies. Both men saw the South Vietnamese as “passive actors in their own history, one of the great tragedies of the Vietnam War” (155). Kissinger purposely kept Saigon in the dark about agreements reached in his secret meetings. And the North Vietnamese were ready to “rip them up,” whatever the cost in human lives (139). Anyone familiar with the Nixon tapes will not be shocked to learn that the president and his administration saw the Vietnamese as “a bunch of shits” (99) or “bastards and little assholes” (202). Their ignorance of and disdain for the Vietnamese blinded them to the sorts of incentives that might have appealed to the Vietnamese, North and South. Tragically, 58,000 Americans, 20,000 on the Nixon/Kissinger watch alone, gave their lives for people so little respected, not to mention the far greater loss of life suffered by the Vietnamese people.

Brigham argues persuasively that Kissinger was equally blind to the psychology and wishes of the American people. Nixon himself thought his advisor “underestimated the impact of domestic politics” (72). Kissinger failed to anticipate the effects of America's bitter war-weariness on his strategy for negotiation. The expansion of the war into Cambodia and Laos fueled popular anti-war sentiment and complicated Nixon's position; Congress was edging toward cutting funding for the war. Nixon “never really understood how his provocative use of military tactics influenced public opinion against the war” (204). This was one of the costs of his self-isolation from the rest of the government. Laird, a well-respected former congressman, understood public sentiment far better.

Making peace is complicated, especially in an unfavorable military situation. Georges Clemenceau astutely remarked in 1919 that “it is easier to make war than peace.” Brigham shows that ending American involvement in Vietnam's civil war would have tried the skills of the most capable diplomat and the most expert government. Sadly, Kissinger was not that diplomat and the Nixon administration was not that government. For all of his posturing and scheming, Kissinger in the end settled on terms that allowed the communists to overthrow the Saigon Government “as a practical outgrowth of the agreement” (218); this “was more than a betrayal of a corrupt Saigon government”—it was “the abandonment of all of South Vietnam” (225). Perhaps that was inevitable, given American opinion and the situation on the ground in Vietnam. But Robert Brigham has vividly reminded us of the extraordinary costs that hubris can impose by turning intractable situations into tragedies.