
The Abandoned War: Henry Kissinger's Vietnam

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Introduction

The Vietnam War remains a controversial subject in every way. Whether historians choose to examine the European colonialization of the country, American intervention, or, especially public support for the war, endless debates will be encountered. In the case of the latter, there is little doubt that American public opinion played a role in President Richard Nixon's 1973 decision to pull American troops from active combat. Despite this, the war dragged on for another two years, with a minimized American presence. Many historians simply shrug their shoulders at the war's dramatic end, satisfied with the belief that the war was unwinnable. However, there is a deeper reason why the house of cards, which was the American presence in Vietnam, ended in such an undignified manner. As America's role in Vietnam dwindled, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's political prospects climbed. While the blame for the South Vietnamese defeat in 1975 cannot be thrown solely upon Kissinger's shoulders, there is a case to be made that Kissinger's flawed counsel and his dismissive opinions of the Vietnamese, influenced both President Nixon and President Gerald R. Ford to shift American attention away from the jungles of Vietnam.

When President Nixon resigned the presidency in August 1974, Vice President Ford, who had been in office for less than one year, assumed the nation's highest office. From the moment Ford took the oath, a plethora of controversies and woes fell upon his shoulders. Stagflation, Watergate's aftermath, and the associated distrust in government were front and center for the new president; but another headache, one that had plagued every American president since Dwight Eisenhower, still hung like a noose around the Oval Office.

Considering Ford's lack of foreign policy experience, and his decision to keep most of Nixon's cabinet in place, in terms of diplomacy Secretary of State Kissinger carried a great deal of weight. This was also true during Nixon's presidency; and despite Nixon's decision to pull active ground troops from Vietnam, American personnel and supplies remained heavily invested in prolonging South Vietnam's struggle for independence from the communist North and insurgent National Liberation Front. However, the Kissinger-led State Department was no longer as invested in winning a war that seemed ever less necessary to fight, especially considering recent American rapprochement with communist China. It can be argued that the decision to allow South Vietnam to fall to Communism was determined out of pragmatism and a sense of realpolitik. The American people were disillusioned and tired of the war, while members of Congress saw a revamped Vietnam engagement as political suicide. Additionally, the Ford Administration, which by 1975 was preparing for a tough election contest, clearly wished to prioritize domestic issues, while Kissinger hoped to rebuild America's foreign policy gravitas elsewhere in the world. The powerful secretary of state worsened this situation with his demonstrated bias against the Vietnamese people, and his lack of patience in reaching a settlement that benefitted the South Vietnamese government. Therefore, the South Vietnamese government proved unable to hold onto its fleeting hold over their country.

Methodology

A great amount of literature exists on the war's final months. Even more significant, key American leaders have written extensively within their personal narratives on this crucial period in U.S. diplomatic relations. This study relies on American sources, including Kissinger's account of the war's final months, titled *Ending the Vietnam War*; Nixon's *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*; and Ford's memoir, *A Time to Heal*. I also consulted State Department documents related to the Vietnam conflict during Kissinger's reign as U.S. secretary of state.

These sources provide clues as to the inner workings of American officials, while also illustrating the outside forces that led to the American abandonment of the Vietnamese cause. Of course, American sources, especially the memoirs of Kissinger and Ford, are not free of self-serving hyperbole aimed at shifting blame for a reduction of American aid to Vietnam on Congress, and ultimately, the American people. This is why political leaders write such memoirs on controversial subjects for which they face blame. Nixon, Ford, and Kissinger were at the helm of American decision making in the 1970s, and ultimately it was their decisions to abandon the South Vietnamese cause that hastened the Southern defeat. This historian's task is one of separating the hyperbole from the kernels of truth that can be found within their statements, and within the works of prior historians.

My argument will be broken into two parts—the first, detailing Kissinger's role in the 1973 peace agreement that led to the withdrawal of American combat troops. The second part examines how Kissinger influenced the ultimate fall of the South Vietnamese government two years later. The crux of the case against Kissinger as an effective diplomat in the Vietnam conflict is that the secretary of state was dismissive of the Vietnamese people, and therefore gave little consideration as to the policy outcomes the South had hoped to achieve.

Historiography

There exist two camps of published works on the end of the Vietnam War, the orthodox view and the latter revisionist camp. Some historians simply include the war's conclusion as an epilogue of a larger narrative of the Vietnam War, in which poor decisions led to an inevitable defeat for the American and South Vietnamese forces. Revisionists, on the other hand, claim that ulterior motives intentionally handicapped the U.S. mission in Vietnam.

Two important works that take the earlier path are John Prados' *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* and Steven Vlastos' "Losing the Vietnam War." Prados traces the entire history of the second Vietnam War, which technically began in the 1940's. What results is a wide view of American war policy over a thirty-year period, and how each presidential decision essentially limited the options for his successor. While the war reached its height of public interest during the Johnson and Nixon years, Prados is especially critical of Dwight Eisenhower and Cold War politics. According to Prados, the American obsession with discrediting communism (or more to the point, the Soviets) led to an unnecessary commitment of American resources to Vietnam. Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon would go on to deepen the level of American involvement in the war, until Nixon, facing impeachment charges over the Watergate affair, attempted to appease public opinion by withdrawing forces (after he further escalated the war during his first term in office). By the time Ford became president, there was little, if anything he could do to reverse the inevitable defeat in Vietnam.¹

¹ John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

Stephen Vlastos in “Losing the Vietnam War” claims that the United States failed in Vietnam because the fight was more of a revolution than a fight with solid objectives. Vlastos essentially claims that the American government became so obsessed with the war that the policy became a mindless display of terrorism, as opposed to a sound military endeavor.² Essentially this orthodox camp suggests that the period between 1973 and 1975 was driven by the consequences of a decade of poor ideologically-driven political and military decisions.

The remaining scholarship relating to the war’s conclusion focuses on the impact of the war upon President Ford and his successors, and how a changing world rendered the outcome of the war less consequential to American interests. Robert J. McMahon and later, journalist Marvin Kalb, examined how the Vietnam experience impacted presidential decision-making in future conflicts. Meanwhile, Kalb uses the war to make a political point. Kalb claims that the United States was careless in choosing when to engage in foreign conflict, demonstrating that the global superpower is not invincible. While not exactly a work of history, Kalb does examine how Vietnam era presidents such as Lyndon Johnson underestimated the North Vietnamese forces.³

On the revisionist side, James H. Willbanks and J.M. Carland claim in “Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War” that historical studies of the war’s end are heavily flawed, as both American and South Vietnamese leaders genuinely hoped to “win” the war, but proved incapable of determining a winning strategy.⁴ More recently, Christopher T. Jasperson writes in “The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration, and the Battle over Vietnam, 1975-76,” that the loss in Vietnam was due both to a lack of effort on behalf of the American forces, and a consequence of a faulty governmental system in South Vietnam. Jasperson argues that while the South Vietnamese government was both corrupt and unresponsive to the needs and desires of their citizenry, the war’s sudden end in 1975 can be traced to a conspiracy between Ford and Kissinger, as they attempted to shift the blame from their own failed policies, toward Congress.⁵ A revisionist perspective also is apparent in Michael Lind’s *Vietnam: The Necessary War*, which lays claim to the idea that the Cold War was essentially World War III, fought through proxy conflicts in Asia. While Lind concedes that the war in Vietnam was essentially unwinnable, it was still, he claims, a vital part of the U.S. victory in the overall war against the Soviet Union.⁶

Kissinger and Nixon: Impatience and Orientalism

In a 1975 post-mortem on American involvement in Vietnam, which U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger prepared for President Ford, the secretary concluded that “We paid a high price, but we gained ten years of time and we changed what then appeared to be an overwhelming momentum (of communist influence). I do not believe our soldiers, or our people need to be ashamed.”⁷ These words were written at the very moment the dust of war was settling over what had been a traumatic and embarrassing chapter in American diplomatic history. Kissinger acknowledges that the Vietnam War had been the most divisive military entanglement the United States had faced

² Stephen Vlastos, “Losing the Vietnam War,” *Radical History Review* 55 (Winter, 1993): 165-74.

³ Marvin L. Kalb and Deborah Kalb, *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* (Washington: Brookings Institute, 2012).

⁴ James H. Willbanks and J.M. Carland, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

⁵ Christopher T. Jasperson, “The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration, and the Battle over Vietnam, 1975-76,” *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 2 (April, 2000): 265-93.

⁶ Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War - A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999).

⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2003), 560

since the Civil War, yet he was still not willing to concede that the U.S. government had erred in taking on the South Vietnamese cause.⁸

Over time, Kissinger's views on the war's end would evolve into a more defensive position, which placed the lion's share of blame onto the South Vietnamese government, stating "the United States owed the peoples of Indochina a decent opportunity for survival; its domestic divisions made it impossible for the United States to pay this debt."⁹ Kissinger has remained consistent in his view that American involvement in Vietnam was a worthy cause, in line with America's modern foreign policy principals. However, the insistence that the South Vietnamese government was ultimately responsible for its collapse, appears suspect considering the heavy role that the United States placed in pushing both North and South Vietnam to the bargaining table, in hopes of reaching a settlement favorable to the west.

By 1972, the Nixon administration, like much of the American people, was tired of fighting over Vietnam. Peace talks in Paris had accomplished little over the past four years, and President Nixon was ready to send the South Vietnamese government an ultimatum; agree to something, anything, or face American abandonment. In December of that year, one month after Nixon's landslide re-election over anti-war Senator George McGovern, the president sent Secretary of State Kissinger to Vietnam to force the point on the South Vietnamese. Before departing for Vietnam, Kissinger expressed optimism over his ability to persuade the South Vietnamese government to accept an agreement like that which was reached in the October talks that led to a temporary bombing halt.¹⁰

However, Kissinger was instead blindsided by North Vietnamese chief negotiator Le Duc Tho's refusal to consider even previously agreed upon points, while issuing several new planks that Kissinger knew would never be accepted by the South. This frustration led Kissinger to concede that the only options available to the United States was to either accept the unaltered terms set forth in the October talks, or to shut down the Paris talks entirely. Over the next few days, Nixon and Kissinger reconcile themselves to the probability talks would not continue, but quarreled over how to respond to this unfortunate development. Kissinger urged Nixon to reach out to the American people for renewed support of the bombing effort, while Nixon preferred to shock the North with unannounced bombings. Ultimately, Nixon ignored Kissinger and deployed his secretive bombing strategy.¹¹

The bombings did succeed in bringing the North back to the bargaining table, although the South Vietnamese government continued to drag its feet in reaching a compromise. This especially annoyed Nixon, who wanted Vietnam off his plate before his second inauguration on January 20th, 1973. Fortunately for the president, the renewed peace talks finally yielded an agreement, but one that heavily divided the South Vietnamese government, gave the North an upper hand, and, most telling, revealed Nixon's ignorance as to South Vietnamese politics. In terms of the South, former Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky felt as though current President Thieu sold his country out to the North, as Hanoi could continue a military presence in parts of the South. Ky felt that this severely weakened the South's case for independence. But perhaps the most egregious aspect of these negotiations was Nixon's complete lack of knowledge of the South Vietnamese government, and his reliance upon Kissinger, whose expressions of "orientalism" all but dismissed the South Vietnamese of whom he was charged with aiding. Nixon admitted to Kissinger that he was unaware of any office holders in the South Vietnamese government beyond Thieu and Ky, and Kissinger revealed his

⁸ Ibid, 7.

⁹ Ibid, 560-61.

¹⁰ Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 724.

¹¹ Ibid, 728-41.

feelings as to the South's Minister of Information as a "little bastard," while summing up the process of negotiating with the Vietnamese as "training rattlesnakes."¹²

Sadly, there is a storied history of westerners dismissing oriental culture as inferior to western norms that seeps into foreign policy decisions. Edward Said famously rebranded "orientalism" as the west's tendency to make foreign policy gains through the establishment of negative global attitudes toward oriental cultures; while rendering western cultures as the correct standards.¹³ Furthermore, American culture tends to genuinely subscribe to the idea that foreign ways of life contain radical elements, simply because these cultures do not align with American views.¹⁴

Kissinger's dismissive attitudes of the Vietnamese, and his assertion that he needed to "train" the Vietnamese, both North and South on the art of negotiation, points to Kissinger's own faults as a diplomat. In a forthcoming book critiquing Kissinger's diplomatic service, historians Robert Brigham and Michaela Coplen argue that Kissinger was "handicapped by a superiority complex that led him to think that he was right and everyone else was wrong... He consistently made value judgments that had no basis at the time and were contradicted by facts found in State Department files."¹⁵ Kissinger issued questionable statements about the Vietnamese people, in his book *Ending the Vietnam War*, which illustrate his biased judgment against what was supposed to be a valuable American ally. Kissinger claimed that the Vietnamese lacked the "humanity" that was inherent in the people of Laos, while also lacking the "grace" of the Cambodians. Kissinger wrote in the context of explaining why the Vietnamese were in nearly constant conflict for much of the twentieth century. Even more, Kissinger believed that the Vietnamese had a contempt for all things foreign. However, one must wonder if constant occupation might influence a nation's views as to foreign influences.¹⁶ Kissinger's one-sided observations cast him as a questionable choice to lead America's longest running war (at the time). While Kissinger's views may have helped him curry favor with an American administration that now sought a speedy end to the war, these views no doubt left the South Vietnamese at a disadvantage.

Kissinger and Ford: The Final Chapter

On August 9th, 1974, Gerald Ford took the oath of office as the 38th President of the United States, following Nixon's resignation in the wake of insurmountable evidence of political corruption. As much of Congress and the American people's attention was tuned to Nixon's Watergate scandal through 1973 and most of 1974, America scaled down assistance of South Vietnam was barely an afterthought. When considering Nixon's left-over budget for FY 1975, congressional leaders of both parties slashed the proposed defense budget. Of course, this reflects a thawing of Cold War tensions, and the will of the American people to move beyond the traumas of the Vietnam War.¹⁷

Kissinger, although annoyed with the South Vietnamese government, was still a "cold warrior," and he hoped to provide Ford with an opportunity to salvage the South Vietnamese government. If the southern government folded, then the historical narrative on the war would be one of total loss by the Americans, who in 1973 viewed the negotiated settlement, which

¹² Robert Dalleck, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 452-453.

¹³ Andrew Rotter, "Saidism Without Said: Orientalism in U.S. Diplomatic History," *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (October, 2000): 1205-1217.

¹⁴ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, "Journeys for Peace and Liberation: Third World Internationalism and Radical Orientalism During the U.S. War in Vietnam," *Pacific Historical Review* 76 no. 4 (November 2007), 575-584.

¹⁵ As quoted in Larry Hertz, "Looking for the Real Henry Kissinger," <https://history.vassar.edu/news/stories/2015-2016/160808-ford-kissinger.html>, accessed August 8, 2016.

¹⁶ Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 434.

¹⁷ *Ibid*; 493-95.

commenced at the end of the American ground and air war in Vietnam, as a dignified settlement which would allow South Vietnam to live free of communism. This would not be the case, however, if the North succeeded in overthrowing the government in the South. In *Ending the Vietnam War*, Kissinger again stated his belief that what he saw as the cartoonish actions of both North and South Vietnam ultimately led to the continued stalemate between the two by late 1974.¹⁸

The confidence demonstrated by the North Vietnamese government also appears to have been a motivating factor for Kissinger's renewed focus on fortifying the South Vietnamese government. Kissinger expressed ire following a statement by North Vietnamese President Le Duc Tho, in which the leader boasted responsibility for Nixon's political downfall, while at the same time warning of the same outcome for Ford. Tho added a pointed insult directed at Kissinger, stating that the secretary had dishonored his own "signature and commitment" to Vietnamese peace. Kissinger, in turn, viewed this as supreme arrogance on the part of Tho, which no doubt spurred Kissinger's jealousy¹⁹

In response, Kissinger doubled down on his insistence that Ford implore Congress for additional political and military support for South Vietnam. The ammunition that Kissinger would use in defending monetary support from Congress, came from James R. Bullington, a low level State Department employee who had just recently returned from a brief visit to South Vietnam. Upon his return, Bullington claimed that without at least \$1.3 billion dollars over each of the next two years, the United States would have no choice other than to cut ties with the South Vietnamese government. Additionally, the United States would need to use its resources to offer aid and asylum to as many South Vietnamese citizens as they could, following the inevitable conquering by the North.²⁰

What resulted was a maneuvering to buy enough time to safely remove American personnel, and critical South Vietnamese allies from the country, before the North could attack the heart of Saigon. Ford addressed Congress in April 1975, in hopes that he could secure funding for this exercise, without giving too much strategic information away. Unfortunately for the administration, Congress balked at the suggestion of further aid for Vietnam. As a result, South Vietnamese President Thieu resigned.²¹ The remaining choice for Ford was to put as positive of a spin as possible to the war's sad end, which he did in a public address at Tulane University on April 23.²²

"Today, America can regain the sense of pride that existed before Vietnam. But it cannot be achieved by refighting a war that is finished as far as America is concerned. As I see it, the time has come to look forward to an agenda for the future, to unify, to bind up the Nation's wounds, and to restore its health and its optimistic self-confidence."

On April 30th, 1975, helicopters lifted remaining American personnel from the rooftop of the sieged American Embassy in Saigon, all the while leaving behind millions of dollars' worth of military machinery to either rot, or be repurposed to the advantage of the now fully united communist Vietnam. To add insult to injury, the following day, Congress rejected the additional funds that Ford had requested on behalf of the mission in Vietnam. While by this point, there was little hope that the United States could alter the outcome of the war; the ultimate failure of the United States government to protect its ally in South Vietnam represented the final failure of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, which Kissinger was all too eager to push through. The United States,

¹⁸ Ibid, 500.

¹⁹ Ibid, 502.

²⁰ Ibid, 502-503.

²¹ Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 253-57.

²² Gerald R. Ford, "Speech at Tulane University," April 23, 1975, Historyplace.com, <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/ford-tulane.htm>, accessed April 15, 2018.

operating almost solely under the direction of Secretary Kissinger, promised then to intervene in the case of any hostile actions undertaken by the North or anyone else. But now, in the Spring of 1975, Kissinger learned the harsh realities of divided government. Kissinger, who conducted himself as though he were smarter than the Vietnamese, and more influential than Congress, suddenly appeared meek and powerless as South Vietnam fell to the communists.²³

Conclusion

Henry Kissinger remains alive and well at the time of this writing, at the age of 94. While he remains an extremely controversial figure, he also maintains the respect of the Washington establishment. Had last year's U.S. presidential election ended as the American political establishment likely expected, his counsel would no doubt have been valued by President Hillary Clinton.²⁴ However, the anti-establishment sentiments of the American proletariat carried the day and awarded to a political and foreign policy novice to the presidency. In the context of the Trump administration's attitudes on foreign policy, there is little room today for the pragmatism and realpolitik espoused by Kissinger and his contemporaries.

However, Kissinger's record suggests that his time in power did little to endear the United States to the rest of the world. Beyond his embarrassing behavior in underestimating the political goals of both North and South Vietnam, Kissinger has even been accused of war crimes throughout his eight years in the Nixon and Ford administrations.²⁵ I will leave it to other historians to detail these accusations and their standing in the international courts. But this paper aims to contribute to the scholarly debate regarding Kissinger's role in the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War; exposing Kissinger's failure to see beyond oriental stereotypes, and the role that a superiority complex played in further torpedoing twenty years of American policy in Vietnam.

²³ Larry Berman, "No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam," *New York Times*, August 12, 2001.

²⁴ Amy Chozik, "Hillary Clinton's Ties to Henry Kissinger Come Back to Haunt Her," *New York Times*, February 12, 2016.

²⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Verso, 2001); Alex Gibney, *The Trials of Henry Kissinger*, DVD (2003; New York: First Run Features, 2002).