

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo FRUS Reviews

[h-diplo.org/FRUS/](http://h-diplo.org/FRUS/)

No. 13

Published on 13 June 2012

Reissued, 9 June 2014

H-Diplo FRUS Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Bradley Lynn Coleman and Edward C. Keefer, eds. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume X, Vietnam, January 1973 - July 1975*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2010.

<http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v10>

Stable URL: <http://h-diplo.org/FRUS/PDF/FRUS13.pdf>

Review by Edwin Martini, Western Michigan University

At a lunchtime meeting on March 24, 1975, Henry Kissinger contemplated how to stave off the impending demise of the U.S.-sponsored regimes in Southeast Asia. Was there any chance of Congress approving last minute supplemental funding as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) was collapsing? Not likely. Was there any point in mining the North Vietnamese harbors? Not really. The United States had finally run out of options to keep the wars in Cambodia and South Vietnam alive. Kissinger, as he does often in this installment of *Foreign Relations of the United States*, let his frustration seethe: "To have the U.S. as an ally is really a joy these days. The most dangerous thing a country can do." Kissinger followed up by ordering the Department of Defense to explore mining the Vietnamese harbors. Asked whether this would be a violation of the Paris Accords, he replied, "I don't know but don't anyone come to me arguing about Article VII, or he'll lose his job" (691).

This volume of the *FRUS* series deals with events between the signing of the Paris Accords in January 1973, through the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon, up to the *SS Mayaguez* incident in May 1975, in which U.S. forces rescued the crew of a container ship seized by the Khmer Rouge but lost over forty of their own troops in the process. This sixteen-month period that remains by far the least studied period of the long U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. According to the editorial introduction, the following themes "dominated U.S. policy and policy objectives during this period: the relationship between force and diplomacy, the struggle between the President and Congress in formation and implementation of U.S. policy, U.S. credibility in the world, and the limits of American power" (iv). These themes do indeed permeate these pages, as do often mind-numbing discussions of the logistics involved in operations ranging from the evacuations of Saigon to the final attack on Koh Tang island, after the crew of the *Mayaguez* had already been recovered. They also remove any doubt, if indeed any remains, about who was driving U.S.

foreign policy during this period. Henry Kissinger appears in nearly every document here, and for those in which he is not present, he is normally referenced directly.

The first section of the volume, “Neither War nor Peace,” (to which the editors could easily have added, “nor Honor,” à la Larry Berman<sup>1</sup>), offers a detailed look into the ways in which Kissinger and Nixon dealt with the many imperfections of the Paris Accords and the limits of the United States in further affecting events south of the seventeenth parallel. A good number of the documents in this section recount at length Kissinger’s negotiations with North Vietnamese leaders including Pham Van Dong and, especially, Le Duc Tho. In his negotiations with the Vietnamese, Kissinger is at his best, alternating between being disarmingly charming and biting sarcasm. As frustrated as he clearly was with Le Duc Tho, the documents reveal Kissinger being much harder on Republic of Vietnam President Nguyen Thieu and the South Vietnamese in general, offering none of the wit and charm he relies on when dealing with representatives from Hanoi. In his final attempt to force Thieu to sign the joint communiqué he had negotiated with Le Duc Tho regarding the enforcement of the Accords, Kissinger concluded by noting that any further delays and deviations by Thieu would be taken by the White House as “a deliberate decision to end the existing relationship between the U.S. and the GVN” (339). The next day in Paris, having secured the reluctant approval of Thieu, Kissinger was once again sparring with Le Duc Tho, but managed to fit in several comments that produced laughter. In explaining the events in Paris, however, Kissinger pointed out to the RVN ambassador that “incidentally, Saigon should not take it seriously when I am seen smiling with Le Duc Tho. I have no illusions about Le Duc Tho. He is a treacherous bastard” (355). Kissinger may have indeed felt that way about Tho—he certainly suggests as much in the second volume of his memoirs, *Years of Upheaval*—but the contrast between his curt dealing with Saigon and his respectful, often playful tone with Tho is nevertheless striking.<sup>2</sup> In that same conversation, Kissinger made clear that he was “washing his hands” of Vietnam, and would never again negotiate with the North.

Alongside the details of the negotiations, these pages are filled with the realities of an ongoing war (the section’s title notwithstanding) being prosecuted amidst a growing domestic political crisis. While the shadow of Watergate hangs over the entire volume, only rarely does it explicitly creep in. In one of the more notable cases, CIA director William Colby sent a memo to Kissinger on June 19, 1974, reporting that Hanoi “believes that President Nixon will not be in office much longer,” and that no further meaningful negotiations can be held “until the American ‘domestic political problems are resolved’” (528). A more telling example, however, comes from a private conversation between Kissinger and Nixon the previous April, just over a week before the resignations of White House aides H.R. Halderman and John Erlichman and the firing of White House counsel

---

<sup>1</sup> Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1982). Kissinger refers to Tho as “dour” and “insolent,” but admits not knowing exactly how Tho felt about him.

John Dean. A frustrated Kissinger complains to the president that “if we didn’t have this god damn domestic situation, a week of bombing would put them... this Agreement in force.” Referring specifically to the recently increased bombing of Laos, Kissinger notes in closing, “And one good thing about Watergate, it puts it all [the bombing] on page 20” (207).

The ongoing U.S. war might have escaped widespread press attention during this period of American disengagement, but it was well known to those inside the national security team and to the Vietnamese, particularly as they continued negotiating the implementation of the Paris Accords in spring 1973. Speaking with White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig on March 30, Nixon acknowledged that the United States was already “bombing the hell” out of Cambodia. Two weeks later, Kissinger chaired a meeting of the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) in which he contemplated the use of force to deal with what he and others viewed as widespread violations of the Accords by the North. Pondering the expansion of recent U.S. attacks in Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam, Kissinger argued that if they pursued such a course, they “should do so massively in order to get our message across” (190). “What we want to do is U.S. power massively,” he continued. “Not to expend it on these little problems like [the north-central Laotian town of] Tha Viang.” Referring to the recently bombed town as “a bore,” Kissinger continued to stress the need for “massive” force to resolve the situation (192-93). While Kissinger wondered aloud about the implications of such an action, Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was practically chomping at the bit to bomb not just throughout the south, but to hit Hanoi and to “mine the whole North Vietnamese coast.” Noting the domestic fallout sure to follow such actions, Kissinger instructed Moorer to develop a plan that would “hit them hard”, since “we pay the same price domestically no matter how severe the bombing is,” to which Moorer enthusiastically responded, “We’re ready!” (201). As Janus-faced as ever, Kissinger was able to look Le Duc Tho in the face less a month later and confirm that the two nations “are still in a condition of peace” (216). Tho knew the realities, however, and confronted Kissinger, particularly on the situation in Cambodia, noting that not only Hanoi, but the U.S. congress and the American people were opposed to such actions, to which Kissinger quickly replied, “The American people are our problem, not the special advisor’s” (226).

Congress was also a growing thorn in the White House’s side as it briefly sought to curtail executive war-making powers. Throughout the lengthy second section of this volume, “Congressional Restrictions on General Warfare,” most of the cases discussed, including military support for evacuation operations, hinged not on the War Powers Act, but on the Cooper-Church amendment to a supplemental military appropriations bill, which forbade further military action in Cambodia. This greatly complicated planning for the evacuation of U.S. personnel during 1974 and 1975, as well as the *SS Mayaguez* operations in spring 1975. It also reflects the degree to which Cambodia, rather than southern Vietnam, bore the brunt of U.S. power in the waning years of the war. The crux of the matter for Kissinger and his staff, however, remained whether or not the United States could continue to engage militarily in South Vietnam under such restrictions, particularly if they used Vietnamese violations of the Paris Accords as a justification.

Few, if any, would dispute that both the U.S. and North Vietnamese were systematically violating multiple articles of the Paris Accords in the spring of 1973. What makes Kissinger's response fascinating to read is his desire to have it both ways: to bomb the hell out of Cambodia and then to complain a few days later to WSAG that "we are not bombing Cambodia," (just the North Vietnamese who happen to be occupying large parts of it); to bemoan the blatant violations of Hanoi and then use any example as an excuse for a new violation by the United States; to explore "massive" and "effective" applications of American firepower knowing, ultimately, that neither he, nor the military, nor the President, could do much to affect the increasingly inevitable outcome in South Vietnam.

As it did in the opening quote, above, that frustration would spill over several times in the spring of 1975, as Kissinger and his team watched the Khmer Rouge close in on Phnom Penh and the North Vietnamese march toward Saigon. As arguments about American aid became increasingly moot, Kissinger seemed somehow to hope against hope that the ARVN would make one last heroic stand while at the same time refusing to acknowledge the impending reality. By March 24, Kissinger returned from a major overseas trip to find Quang Tri toppled and Hue all but fallen; he demanded to know "how did all this happen?" (687) As the ARVN fell apart over the next few weeks, Kissinger remained both amazed and increasingly apoplectic. As Da Nang fell, he asked his staff, "Why don't they fight any place?" (714) As the NVA continued down the coast, he wondered, "Why didn't [ARVN] fight for a day at Nha Trang?" But of course he knew the answer: without American military support, they had little reason. During the invasion of Laos and the Easter Offensive in previous years, ARVN's inability to stand on its own had been exposed; only U.S. air power stopped those operations from becoming complete disasters for the Saigon regime. All that was left for Kissinger, and for the rest of those wishing for a last-ditch U.S. intervention, was to wait for the end to come, a task made more interminable, no doubt, by the absence of clear reports coming from Vietnam. The lack of reliable information was driven home powerfully by a CIA briefing by William Colby on March 28, 1975, only a month before Saigon fell, that the RVN could hold Saigon and the Mekong Delta, but they would likely be defeated sometime in 1976 (707). Kissinger, despite his curiosity at ARVN's collapse, was under no such illusions.

Disgusted, on March 31, he snidely replied to a staffer's mention of the United Nations' request for increased support of refugee assistance: "Of course we'll do it. That takes no guts." Informed that Lon Nol was planning to leave Cambodia the next day in advance of the Khmer Rouge taking Phnom Penh, he added, "We are a disgrace to be an ally. As soon as somebody gets in trouble, they get the hell out of there" (717). As the two capitols fell into Communist hands, Kissinger once again retreated into bitter sarcasm, making clear "for the record" that he was simply making a joke when he hoped that *New York Times* reporter Sidney Schamberg (of *The Killing Fields* fame) had been captured by the Khmer Rouge (833), and claiming, apparently for the record again, this time in a remarkably rare briefing with President Ford on April 21, that "Vietnam will be off our back in two weeks, and Congress will be on our back to give aid to Communist Vietnam and we will be resisting" (870).

The final section of the volume deals exclusively with the *SS Mayaguez* incident in May 1975. While the documents collected here offer little in the way of surprises, they do provide more detailed documentation than has been offered in recent military histories of the events, and might be used as a useful jumping off point for further works in this area.<sup>3</sup> As with other works in this period, the events surrounding the seizure and rescue of the ship and its American crew, the reckless destruction of Cambodian targets after the rescue had been completed, and the senseless U.S. casualties serve as an unsettling and unsatisfying, yet somehow appropriate coda to the Vietnam War era.

The editors should be praised for choosing an array of documents that offers a good sense of what was going on inside the National Security apparatus of the United States during the end of the war in Vietnam. Given the important impact they would have on Vietnam's economic future and on the future U.S. relations with Vietnam, the inclusion of at least some documents about the decision to extend and strengthen economic sanctions against the country in the spring of 1975 would have been helpful; those decisions still remain largely ignored in the scholarly literature on U.S.-Vietnamese relations. Overall, however, while this volume certainly appears to reinforce most of what we know about the events in question, it could very well serve as a starting point for further explorations on these grossly understudied years.

**Edwin Martini** is Associate Chair and Associate Professor of History at Western Michigan University. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Maryland in 2004. He is the author of *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000* (University of Massachusetts, 2007), and *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty* (University of Massachusetts, forthcoming, October 2012). He is currently working on a new book exploring the global history and legacies of napalm.

---

**This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License.** To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

---

---

<sup>3</sup> The most recent addition to works on the *Mayaguez* is James Wise and Scott Baron *The 14-Hour War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2011). As with others, it relies largely on interviews and previously published sources.