

# **Did Nixon Sell Out South Vietnam?**

## **A Review of *No Peace, No Honor***

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*No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*, by Lany Berman. New York: The Free Press, 2001. xv 334. ISBN 0-684-84968-2, \$27.50 cloth.

This book, published by Lany Berman in 2001, “uses a cache of recently declassified documents to offer a new perspective on why the country known as South Vietnam ceased to exist after April 1975” (5). Berman presents and rejects the two most familiar explanations for the failure of the January 1973 Paris Accords, based on the arguments that either the American Congress or the South Vietnamese themselves lost the war. Instead, he holds that President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger anticipated that the North Vietnamese would violate the cease-fire agreement and believed that the United States would have to renew a prolonged air war against the communists. Berman argues that the Nixon-Kissinger plan was scrapped due to the impact of the Watergate scandal and because both men had overestimated the will of the American people to continue the Vietnam conflict once all military personnel and prisoners of war returned home.

Chapter 1 offers a history of the conflict up to the 1968 presidential election. Of particular significance to the manner in which the North Vietnamese would treat subsequent peace talks with the Americans is the 1954 Geneva Agreement. Believing that they were bullied by China and the Soviet Union into an agreement that split their country and promised a nationwide election that never occurred, the communists adopted a hard line, “learning the hard way that it should trust no one and give up nothing in negotiation” (19). After Lyndon Johnson announced his intention not to run for reelection for president, the Soviets and the government of South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu intervened in the 1968 campaign, albeit for different reasons. While the Soviets wanted Hubert Humphrey to win—even offering financial assistance—supporters of Thieu maintained contacts with the Nixon campaign and helped to defy the Vietnam policy of the Johnson White House.

Chapters 2 through 4 depict the Vietnam policy of the Nixon White House through 1971. Inheriting a policy that had positioned 500,000 U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam, Nixon adopted a multifaceted approach. He began a process of reducing American troop strength while giving the South Vietnamese the ability to fight the war successfully on their own, or Vietnamization, as it came to be known. Second, President Nixon had Kissinger start a secret negotiating strategy with North Vietnam to reach a “deal directly with the enemy and keep much of his own government and even his ally in the dark about it” (44). Third, Nixon sought to initiate a policy of detente with the Soviet Union, in part to pressure the North Vietnamese to take peace talks seriously. Fourth, he began a series of air strikes against enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia. Meanwhile, Kissinger and North Vietnamese peace negotiator Le Duc Tho started talks about ending U.S. participation in the Vietnam conflict. Whereas the United States wanted to ensure the return of prisoners of war, the communists wanted their troops to remain in South Vietnam and a new coalition government formed. Negotiations dragged on for many reasons, especially because North Vietnam took advantage of American antiwar sentiment and entertained independent U.S. representatives such as Senator George McGovern, Nixon’s 1972 Democratic opponent, who in 1971 sought an exchange of POWs for a simultaneous American withdrawal.

Chapters 5 through 11 recount the many Vietnam War-related events of 1972. President Nixon’s historic trip to China in February of that year had several purposes, one of which was to

put a wedge in the Chinese-North Vietnamese alliance. Berman observes that even though China claimed that it could not interfere in Vietnamese affairs, “the Sino-U.S. summit rekindled Hanoi’s memories of the 1954 Geneva Conference” (122). The Easter Sunday offensive by North Vietnam was the largest attack during the entire Vietnam War. It was repelled by South Vietnamese and American forces thanks to communist tactical errors and a massive U.S. bombing campaign, known as Operation Linebacker. Over the next six months, it is estimated that over 155,000 tons of bombs fell on North Vietnam. In South Vietnam, more than 100,000 communist troops were killed. In October, Kissinger and Tho appeared close to a treaty, but it was stalled by President Thieu, who had been kept out of the loop on most key issues, and by North Vietnam, which sought strategic advantage by committing as many troops to South Vietnam as possible before a cease-fire agreement. In reaction to the breakdown of talks after his reelection, President Nixon ordered a mid-December resumption of bombing in North Vietnam. The operation lasted until December 29, when Hanoi agreed to restart negotiations.

After Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho put the finishing touches on the agreement, the Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973, by four different parties, including the U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and representatives of communist forces in South Vietnam, the Provisional Revolutionary Government. The agreement specified (1) a cease-fire throughout North and South Vietnam; (2) withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam within sixty days; (3) return of all American service personnel and civilians captured and held throughout Indochina within 60 days; (4) a ban on the infiltration of troops and war supplies into South Vietnam; (5) a ban on the use of Laotian and Cambodian base areas to attack South Vietnam and a concomitant withdrawal of all foreign troops from those countries. While the communists had dropped their long-standing demand for the removal of President Thieu, they had succeeded in allowing Northern troops to remain in place within South Vietnam. Although he adamantly opposed the conditions of the agreement, President Thieu signed it due to unremitting pressure from the Americans and because of President Nixon’s private commitments to him to respond to any renewal of aggression by the communists.

The final two chapters deal with the aftermath of the January 1973 peace agreement. Berman furnishes evidence that Nixon and Kissinger contemplated bombing North Vietnam on several occasions starting as early as March 1973. However, “Watergate sapped any resolve that Nixon may have had to bomb again” (259) and, combined with congressional assertiveness and American public opinion, prevented Nixon from fulfilling his pledge to Thieu and the people of South Vietnam. After Nixon’s resignation in August 1974, President Gerald Ford sought significant financial assistance for South Vietnam as Hanoi began a final military assault against the besieged nation. His requests were rejected by Congress, leading to a final victory by the communists on April 30, 1975.

Berman’s description of the American evacuation during the final days before the takeover of Saigon makes clear his belief that the U.S. peace agreement and subsequent failure to protect South Vietnam represent a sellout of an ally. He provides several examples that deride the phrase “peace with honor,” used by Richard Nixon in reference to Vietnam policy since 1968. Other writers appear to agree with Berman’s assessment. Kimbal’s study, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (University Press of Kansas, 1998) opines that Nixon’s “faith in mad strategies and triangular diplomacy . . . had unnecessarily prolonged the war, with all of its baneful consequences of death, destruction, and division for Vietnam and America that this brought about” (371). In a November 5, 2001, review of Berman’s book which appeared in *The Nation*, Carolyn Eisenberg contends that Nixon was guilty of betrayal, “not of the puppet regime in Saigon but of the people in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and in the United States who lost their lives needlessly” (27). Understandably, Richard Nixon himself viewed things much differently, as he enunciated in his 1985 book, *No More Vietnams*:

Our defeat was so great a tragedy because after the peace agreement of January 1973 it was so easily avoidable. Consolidating our gains would not have taken much to accomplish—a credible threat to enforce the peace agreement through

retaliatory strikes against North Vietnam and a sufficient flow of aid to Cambodia and South Vietnam. But Congress legislated an end to our involvement. It also legislated the defeat of our friends in the same stroke. (210)

The late William Colby, author of *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement In Vietnam* (Contemporary Books, 1989) believed that the Vietnam War could have been fought differently and that it could have been won. He cited the year 1972 as one of three “hopeful” years during the conflict. Although he also identified three “ghastly” years, none occurred in the Nixon White House years.

*No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* has many positive features. First, the book is well written and easy to read. Second, the text portrays in much detail the difficulty in peace negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam, as represented mainly by Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, respectively. Third, the author divulges some hitherto little-known sidebars to the Vietnam conflict, such as former Teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa's failed 1972 bid to secure release of American POWs.

Yet Berman's study is deficient in several respects. Initially, the author places too much blame for the events of the war on President Nixon and not enough on the previous chief executives who contributed to the tragedy. Further, the lack of a comprehensive review of the 1974-75 period before the fall of Saigon is unfair to President Ford, who is portrayed as only reacting to the final days of the war. Related to both of the criticisms above, Berman neglects to probe the legislative actions that, according to both Nixon and Ford, hamstrung their efforts. Finally, he similarly forgets to delineate the heinous brutality of the communists during their aggression in South Vietnam and after their victory.

If one accepts the premise that by abandoning an ally the United States lost the Vietnam War, then Berman's polemic is less than convincing on the role of President Richard Nixon in the American defeat. For Nixon did not start the war and was not in office at its conclusion. To argue that Nixon was singlehandedly responsible for the fall of South Vietnam is to underestimate the means by which he sought to end the conflict in Southeast Asia.

Berman's book raises questions still relevant to American foreign policy. In the fight against international terrorism, for example, blaming the current president when a traumatic event happens still won't do. The George W. Bush administration cannot be held culpable alone for the terrorist strikes on the United States on September 11, 2001. The al-Qaeda organization attacked at least seven American targets overseas during the 1990s, killing military personnel and civilians alike. Though there may have been some indirect warning, no president—and this includes Bill Clinton, whom some conservatives tried to blame—could have predicted the manner in which the September 11 assaults transpired or the destruction they caused. The blame game will be played, no doubt, by some partisans and perhaps later by historians. In the meantime, it will be this administration's response to the complexities surrounding 9/11 that counts. Based on the reaction to that affront to humanity, one thing seems clear: the restrictions, limitations, and uncertainty that hampered the American effort in Vietnam will not reoccur.

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