

Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia

Reviewed by Dr. SEAN SCANLON, The National WWII Museum

Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia, by Carolyn Woods Eisenberg. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Much of the voluminous literature on the American war in Vietnam focuses on the early years of the 1960s, when the American military presence was growing and fighting in South Vietnam was at its heaviest. Less has been written about the final years of the war, when U.S. policy was dominated by President Richard Nixon and his influential national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. The first major history of this important chapter in the Vietnam War appeared in 1998, just as important U.S. archives were opening up to researchers.¹ Twenty-five years later, historian Carolyn Woods Eisenberg has written *Fire and Rain*, a history of U.S. policy in Vietnam under these two important policymakers. A professor at Hofstra University whose previous book analyzed the division of Germany after the Second World War,² Eisenberg aims to provide both a new interpretation of the Vietnam War during the Nixon administration based on archival research, and a detailed narrative history that moves beyond the corridors of the White House and the Pentagon to explore how American policy impacted people on the ground throughout Southeast Asia. She is mostly successful in both these ambitious goals.

Elected in a close race in 1968, Richard Nixon entered the White House promising to withdraw American troops and bring the Vietnam War to a swift end, but he and his team quickly encountered the same challenges that had bedeviled American

¹ See Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 1998).

² See Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–1949* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

policymakers for nearly a decade. In *Fire and Rain*, Eisenberg explores how the Nixon administration conducted the war in Vietnam against the backdrop of dramatic negotiations between the United States and its longtime Cold War rivals, China and the Soviet Union. Early on, she notes how the Nixon administration's policies in Vietnam signaled a major break with previous administrations, whose actions in Vietnam were dictated by Cold War fears of communist expansion. Unlike its predecessors, she writes, "the administration's mounting difficulties in solving its Vietnam problem increasingly shaped interactions with Moscow and Beijing."³ Drawing on recently declassified documents from American archives, Eisenberg argues that the war in Vietnam played a major role in negotiations between the Americans and the Soviets and Chinese during the early 1970s, negotiations that the Nixon administration held up as major successes and contributed to Nixon's landslide electoral victory in 1972. In effect, Nixon and Kissinger were trying to use diplomacy with two longtime communist rivals to conclude a war that American officials had long justified on the grounds that it was, at the end of the day, a war to contain those same communist rivals.

Analysts of the Nixon administration's foreign policy understandably devote enormous time and attention to figures at the top, especially President Nixon himself and Henry Kissinger.⁴ But in Eisenberg's telling, one understudied policymaker who emerges as a major figure in the administration's Vietnam policy was Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. A conservative Republican from Wisconsin, Laird served in the House of Representatives for nearly two decades before agreeing to lead the Defense Department. Throughout his four years at the Pentagon, Laird was a consistent advocate for reducing the American military presence in South Vietnam. Laird had grave doubts about whether the United States could prevail militarily, and came to see it as his

³ Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 8.

⁴ See for instance Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007); David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); and Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).

mission to eventually bring all American troops home. Laird's efforts to bring American troops home from South Vietnam infuriated Nixon and Kissinger, and contributed to a secretive atmosphere in which the president's circle of advisers steadily shrank. Despite his position as Secretary of Defense, Nixon and Kissinger excluded Laird and senior officials at the State Department (including Secretary of State William Rogers) from important discussions about major initiatives, including their planning for the 1970 invasion of Cambodia. But despite their doubts about many of Nixon and Kissinger's policies and despite being excluded from important decisions, Laird, Rogers, and many other senior officials eventually went along and refused to break with the administration or criticize the president and his advisers publicly.

While much of *Fire and Rain* focuses on high-level policymakers in Washington, Eisenberg makes an admirable effort to follow American policy down to the ground level in Southeast Asia to look at how policies adopted at the highest levels of power impacted the lives of people in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, people the United States was ostensibly trying to protect from the evils of communism. One such passage comes in Chapter 4, when she relates the story of a blue-ribbon panel dispatched to South Vietnam to observe conditions in South Vietnamese prisons. After observing horrific conditions in several prisons controlled by the Saigon government, the U.S. Study Team on Religious and Political Freedom in Vietnam released a highly critical report, condemning conditions in these places and the policies of the government that the United States supported. Eisenberg writes that, "As in the Johnson years, such obliviousness to the harshness of the South Vietnamese regime impeded sensible decision-making."¹ Eisenberg has an excellent eye for telling anecdotes, such as the time when days of protests of protests broke out in the South Vietnamese provincial capital of Quinhon following the shooting of a twelve-year-old student named Nguyen Van Minh by American soldiers.² These and many other examples highlight the immense gap

¹ Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 70.

² Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 233.

between what American officials were trying to achieve in Vietnam and the consequences of their actions to people the Americans were supposedly fighting to protect.

In addition to following the policies formulated in Washington down to their violent and destructive implementations in Southeast Asia, Eisenberg also delves into the domestic side of the Vietnam War during the Nixon years, specifically the interplay between the administration and the antiwar movement. She describes how the Nixon and his aides worked to give the impression that they were trying to end the war and bring American troops home, while secretly prolonging and expanding the war, especially using American airpower and in neighboring “neutral” countries Laos and Cambodia. Despite some of the largest antiwar demonstrations of the entire conflict in 1969 and 1970, Nixon and Kissinger recognized that they could continue the war as long as a critical mass of American voters still supported it. This meant that thousands more American soldiers and many, many more Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians would die in a war that was already more than a decade old when the Nixon administration took office.¹⁴⁰

Nixon and Kissinger believed that intensified military operations would produce something resembling an American victory in Vietnam, which would both allow the U.S. to withdraw its troops from South Vietnam and preserve the pro-American regime in South Vietnam. This involved intensified bombing campaigns against North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and two joint American-South Vietnamese ground offensives into neighboring Cambodia in the spring of 1970 and Laos in 1971. Eisenberg points to the latter offensive, a South Vietnamese-led operation known as Lam Son 719, as both a microcosm of American failures in Vietnam and a turning point after which the administration could no longer hold out any hope for military victory.¹⁴¹ This realization intensified Nixon and Kissinger’s efforts to achieve a negotiated settlement to the

¹⁴⁰ Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 192.

¹⁴¹ Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 250 and 264.

Vietnam War by bringing pressure on the North Vietnamese from their Soviet and Chinese allies. This effort was integral to the administration's broader project of reshaping American relations with its Cold War communist adversaries, a strategy that historians have labeled *détente*. But while this effort yielded important results in some areas, from arms-control talks with the Soviets to Nixon's dramatic visit to China in February 1972, the Soviets and Chinese proved extremely reluctant to help the United States achieve their objectives in Vietnam. Despite suffering heavy losses from American airpower, the North Vietnamese achieved enough military gains in the early 1970s that they could agree to American conditions for withdrawal without compromising their long-term objective of uniting Vietnam under a communist government in Hanoi, which they achieved in 1975 after the Americans withdrew.

At its core, *Fire and Rain* is a damning indictment of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam under Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who, Eisenberg argues, "prolonged the war as long as they did because it served their own needs and met other institutional requirements."¹⁴² Eisenberg is an effective storyteller, and her narrative flows extremely well, but despite her claims to offer a new interpretation, *Fire and Rain* tells a familiar story. Drawing mostly on American published archival sources and the vast and growing secondary literature in English, she can only offer limited insights into the thinking and behavior of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet actors. Nevertheless, scholars of Pacific and Southeast Asian history will certainly benefit from reading Eisenberg's detailed narrative of the Vietnam War during the Nixon years.

¹⁴² Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain*, 516.