Exposing Nixon’s Vietnam Lies

Exclusive: After resigning over the Watergate political-spying scandal, President Nixon sought to rewrite the history of his Vietnam War strategies to deny swapping lives for political advantage, but newly released documents say otherwise, writes James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

Richard Nixon spent years rebuilding his tattered reputation after he resigned from office in disgrace on Aug. 9, 1974. The rehabilitation project was codenamed “The Wizard.” The idea was to position himself as an elder statesman of foreign policy, a Wise Man. And to a remarkable degree through the sale of his memoirs, his appearance with David Frost in a series of highly rated interviews, and the publication of at least eight books after that Nixon largely succeeded in his goal.

There was another aspect of that plan: to do all he could to keep his presidential papers and tapes classified, which, through a series of legal maneuvers, he managed to achieve in large part. Therefore, much of what he and Henry Kissinger wrote about in their memoirs could stand, largely unchallenged.

It was not until years after his death that the bulk of the Nixon papers and tapes were opened up to the light of day. And Kissinger’s private papers will not be declassified until five years after his death. With that kind of arrangement, it was fairly easy for Nixon to sell himself as the Sage of San Clemente, but two new books based on the long-delayed declassified record one by Ken Hughes and the other by William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball undermine much of Nixon’s rehabilitation.

For instance, in 1985 at the peak of President Ronald Reagan’s political power Nixon wrote No More Vietnams, making several dubious claims about the long conflict which included wars of independence by Vietnam against both France and the United States.

In the book, Nixon tried to insinuate that Vietnam was not really one country for a very long time and that the split between north and south was a natural demarcation. He also declared that the Vietnam War had been won under his administration, and he insisted that he never really considered bombing the irrigation dikes, using tactical nuclear weapons, or employing the strategy of a “decent interval” to mask an American defeat for political purposes.

Nixon’s Story
In No More Vietnams, Nixon said that after going through a series of option papers furnished to him by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, he decided on a five-point program for peace in Vietnam. (Nixon, pgs. 104-07) This program consisted of Vietnamization, i. e., turning over the fighting of the war to the South Vietnamese army (the ARVN); pacification, which was a clear-and-hold strategy for maintaining territory in the south; diplomatic isolation of North Vietnam from its allies, China and the Soviet Union; peace negotiations with very few preconditions; and gradual withdrawal of American combat troops. Nixon asserted that this program was successful.

But the currently declassified record does not support Nixon’s version of history, either in the particulars of what was attempted or in Nixon’s assessment of its success.

When Richard Nixon came into office he was keenly aware of what had happened to his predecessor Lyndon Johnson, who had escalated the war to heights that President Kennedy had never imagined, let alone envisaged. The war of attrition strategy that LBJ and General William Westmoreland had decided upon did not work. And the high American casualties it caused eroded support for the war domestically. Nixon told his Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman that he would not end up like LBJ, a prisoner in his own White House.

Therefore, Nixon wanted recommendations that would shock the enemy, even beyond the massive bombing campaigns and other bloody tactics employed by Johnson. As authors Burr and Kimball note in their new book Nixon’s Nuclear Specter, Nixon was very much influenced by two modes of thought.

First, as Vice President from 1953-61, he was under the tutelage of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and President Dwight Eisenhower, who advocated a policy of nuclear brinksmanship, that is the willingness to threaten nuclear war if need be. Dulles felt that since the United States had a large lead in atomic weapons that the Russians would back down in the face of certain annihilation.

Nixon was also impressed by the alleged threat of President Eisenhower to use atomic weapons if North Korea and China did not bargain in good faith to end the Korean War. Nixon actually talked about this in a private meeting with southern politicians at the 1968 GOP convention. (Burr and Kimball, Chapter 2)

Dulles also threatened to use atomic weapons in Vietnam. Burr and Kimball note the proposal by Dulles to break the Viet Minh’s siege of French troops at Dien Bien Phu by a massive air mission featuring the use of three atomic bombs. Though Nixon claimed in No More Vietnams that the atomic option was not seriously considered (Nixon, p. 30), the truth appears to have been more ambiguous, that Nixon thought the siege could be lifted without atomic weapons
but he was not against using them. Eisenhower ultimately vetoed their use when he could not get Great Britain to go along.

**Playing the Madman**

Later, when in the Oval Office, Nixon tempered this nuclear brinksmanship for the simple reason that the Russians had significantly closed the gap in atomic stockpiles. So, as Burr and Kimball describe it, Nixon and Kissinger wanted to modify the Eisenhower-Dulles brinksmanship with the “uncertainty effect” or as Nixon sometimes called it, the Madman Theory. In other words, instead of overtly threatening to use atomic bombs, Nixon would have an intermediary pass on word to the North Vietnamese leadership that Nixon was so unhinged that he might resort to nuclear weapons if he didn’t get his way. Or, as Nixon explained to Haldeman, if you act crazy, the incredible becomes credible:

“They'll believe any threat of force that Nixon makes because it’s Nixon. I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that ‘for God’s sake you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry, and he has his hand on the nuclear button.’”

Nixon believed this trick would work, saying “Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.”

Kissinger once told special consultant Leonard Garment to convey to the Soviets that Nixon was somewhat nutty and unpredictable. Kissinger bought into the concept so much so that he was part of the act: the idea was for Nixon to play the “bad cop” and Kissinger the “good cop.”

Another reason that Nixon and Kissinger advocated the Madman Theory was that they understood that Vietnamization and pacification would take years. And they did not think they could sustain public opinion on the war for that long. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers both thought they could, their opinions were peripheral because Nixon and Kissinger had concentrated the foreign policy apparatus in the White House.

**Playing for Time**

Privately, Nixon did not think America could win the war, so he wanted to do something unexpected, shocking, “over the top.” As Burr and Kimball note, in 1969, Nixon told his speechwriters Ray Price, Pat Buchanan and Richard Whalen: “I've come to the conclusion that there’s no way to win the war. But we can’t say that, of course. In fact we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage.”
In a phone call with Kissinger, Nixon said, “In Saigon, the tendency is to fight the war for victory. But you and I know it won’t happen it is impossible. Even Gen. Abrams agreed.”

These ideas were expressed very early in 1969 in a document called NSSM-1, a study memorandum as opposed to an action memorandum with Kissinger asking for opinions on war strategy from those directly involved. The general consensus was that the other side had “options over which we have little or no control” which would help them “continue the war almost indefinitely.” (ibid, Chapter 3)

Author Ken Hughes in *Fatal Politics* agrees. Nixon wanted to know if South Vietnam could survive without American troops there. All of the military figures he asked replied that President Nguyen van Thieu’s government could not take on both the Viet Cong and the regular North Vietnamese army. And, the United States could not help South Vietnam enough for it to survive on its own. (Hughes, pgs. 14-15)

As Hughes notes, Nixon understood that this bitter truth needed maximum spin to make it acceptable for the public. So he said, “Shall we leave Vietnam in a way that by our own actions consciously turns the country over to the Communists? Or shall we leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive as a free people? My plan will end American involvement in a way that will provide that chance.” (ibid, p. 15)

If the U.S. media allowed the argument to be framed like that, which it did, then the hopeless cause did have a political upside. As Kissinger told Nixon, “The only consolation we have is that the people who put us into this position are going to be destroyed by the right. They are going to be destroyed. The liberals and radicals are going to be killed. This is, above all, a rightwing country.” (ibid, p. 19)

Could anything be less honest, less democratic or more self-serving? Knowing that their critics were correct, and that the war could not be won, Nixon and Kissinger wanted to portray the people who were right about the war as betraying both America and South Vietnam.

**Political Worries**

Just how calculated was Nixon about America’s withdrawal from Vietnam? Republican Sen. Hugh Scott warned him about getting out by the end of 1972, or “another man may be standing on the platform” on Inauguration Day 1973. (ibid, p. 23) Nixon told his staff that Scott should not be saying things like this in public.

But, in private, the GOP actually polled on the issue. It was from these polls
that Nixon tailored his speeches. He understood that only 39 percent of the public approved a Dec. 31, 1971 withdrawal, if it meant a U.S. defeat. When the question was posed as withdrawal, even if it meant a communist takeover, the percentage declined to 27 percent. Nixon studied the polls assiduously. He told Haldeman, “That’s the word. We say Communist takeover.” (ibid, p. 24)

The polls revealed another hot button issue: getting our POW’s back. This was even more sensitive with the public than the “Communist takeover” issue. Therefore, during a press conference, when asked about Scott’s public warning, Nixon replied that the date of withdrawal should not be related to any election day. The important thing was that he “didn’t want one American to be in Vietnam one day longer than is necessary to achieve the two goals that I have mentioned: the release of our prisoners and the capacity of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves against a Communist takeover.” He then repeated that meme two more times. The press couldn’t avoid it. (Hughes, p. 25)

Still, although Nixon and Kissinger understood they could not win the war in a conventional sense, they were willing to try other methods in the short run to get a better and quicker settlement, especially if it included getting North Vietnamese troops out of South Vietnam. Therefore, in 1969, he and Kissinger elicited suggestions from inside the White House, the Pentagon, the CIA, and Rand Corporation, through Daniel Ellsberg. These included a limited invasion of North Vietnam and Laos, mining the harbors and bombing the north, a full-scale invasion of North Vietnam, and operations in Cambodia.

Or as Kissinger put it, “We should develop alternate plans for possible escalating military actions with the motive of convincing the Soviets that the war may get out of hand.” Kissinger also said that bombing Cambodia would convey the proper message to Moscow.

If anything shows that Kissinger was as backward in his thinking about Indochina as Nixon, this does. For as Burr and Kimball show — through Dobrynin’s memos to Moscow — the Russians could not understand why the White House would think the Kremlin had such influence with Hanoi. Moscow wanted to deal on a variety of issues, including arms agreements and the Middle East.

So far from Kissinger’s vaunted “linkage” theory furthering the agenda with Russia, it’s clear from Dobrynin that it hindered that agenda. In other words, the remnants of a colonial conflict in the Third World were stopping progress in ameliorating the Cold War. This was the subtotal of the Nixon/Kissinger geopolitical accounting sheet.

Judging Kissinger on Vietnam
Just how unbalanced was Kissinger on Vietnam? In April 1969, there was a shoot-down of an American observation plane off the coast of Korea. When White House adviser John Ehrlichman asked Kissinger how far the escalation could go, Kissinger replied it could go nuclear.

In a memo to Nixon, Kissinger advised using tactical nuclear weapons. He wrote that “all hell would break loose for two months”, referring to domestic demonstrations. But he then concluded that the end result would be positive: “there will be peace in Asia.”

Kissinger was referring, of course, to the effectiveness of the Madman Theory. In reading these two books, it is often hard to decipher who is more dangerous in their thinking, Nixon or Kissinger.

In the first phase of their approach to the Vietnam issue, Nixon and Kissinger decided upon two alternatives. The first was the secret bombing of Cambodia. In his interview with David Frost, Nixon expressed no regrets about either the bombing or the invasion. In fact, he said, he wished he had done it sooner, which is a puzzling statement because the bombing of Cambodia was among the first things he authorized. Nixon told Frost that the bombing and the later invasion of Cambodia had positive results: they garnered a lot of enemy supplies, lowered American casualties in Vietnam, and hurt the Viet Cong war effort.

Frost did not press the former president with the obvious follow-up: But Mr. Nixon, you started another war and you helped depose Cambodia’s charismatic ruler, Prince Sihanouk. And because the Viet Cong were driven deeper into Cambodia, Nixon then began bombing the rest of the country, not just the border areas, leading to the victory of the radical Khmer Rouge and the deaths of more than one million Cambodians.

This all indicates just how imprisoned Nixon and Kissinger were by the ideas of John Foster Dulles and his visions of a communist monolith with orders emanating from Moscow’s Comintern, a unified global movement controlled by the Kremlin. Like the Domino Theory, this was never sound thinking. In fact, the Sino-Soviet border dispute, which stemmed back to 1962, showed that communist movements were not monolithic. So the idea that Moscow could control Hanoi, or that the communists in Cambodia were controlled by the Viet Cong, this all ended up being disastrously wrong.

As Sihanouk told author William Shawcross after the Cambodian catastrophe unfolded, General Lon Nol, who seized power from Prince Sihanouk, was nothing without the military actions of Nixon and Kissinger, and “the Khmer Rouge were nothing without Lon Nol.” (Shawcross, Sideshow, p. 391)
But further, as Shawcross demonstrates, the immediate intent of the Cambodian invasion was to seek and destroy the so-called COSVN, the supposed command-and-control base for the communist forces in South Vietnam supposedly based on the border inside Cambodia. No such command center was ever found. (ibid, p. 171)

**Why the Drop in Casualties?**

As for Nixon’s other claim, American casualties declined in Indochina because of troop rotation, that is, the ARVN were pushed to the front lines with the Americans in support. Or as one commander said after the Cambodian invasion: it was essential that American fatalities be cut back, “If necessary, we must do it by edict.” (ibid, p. 172)

But this is not all that Nixon tried in the time frame of 1969-70, his first two years in office. At Kissinger’s request he also attempted a secret mission to Moscow by Wall Street lawyer Cyrus Vance. Part of Kissinger’s linkage theory, Vance was to tell the Soviets that if they leaned on Hanoi to accept a Nixonian framework for negotiations, then the administration would be willing to deal on other fronts, and there would be little or no escalation. The negotiations on Vietnam included a coalition government, and the survival of Thieu’s government for at least five years, which would have been two years beyond the 1972 election. (As we shall see, this is the beginning of the final “decent interval” strategy.)

The Vance mission was coupled with what Burr and Kimball call a “mining ruse.” The Navy would do an exercise to try and make the Russians think they were going to mine Haiphong and five other North Vietnamese harbors. Yet, for reasons stated above, Nixon overrated linkage, and the tactic did not work. But as Kissinger said, “If in doubt, we bomb Cambodia.” Which they did.

As the authors note, Nixon had urged President Johnson in 1967 to extend the bombing throughout Indochina, into Cambodia and Laos. Johnson had studied these and other options but found too many liabilities. He had even studied the blockading of ports but concluded that Hanoi would compensate for a blockade in a relatively short time by utilizing overland routes and off-shore unloading.

But what Johnson did not factor in was the Nixon/Kissinger Madman Theory. For example, when a State Department representative brought up the overall military ineffectiveness of the Cambodian bombing, Kissinger replied, “That doesn’t bother me we’ll hit something.” He also told an assistant, “Always keep them guessing.” The problem was, the “shock effect” ended up being as mythical as linkage.

In 1969, after the failure of the Vance mission, the mining ruse, the warnings
to Dobrynin, and the continued bombing of Cambodia, which went on in secret for 14 months, Nixon still had not given up on his Madman Theory. He sent a message to Hanoi saying that if a resolution was not in the works by November, “he will regretfully find himself obliged to have recourse to measures of great consequence and force.”

What were these consequences? Nixon had wanted to mine Haiphong for a long time. But, as did Johnson, he was getting different opinions about its effectiveness. So he considered massive interdiction bombing of the north coupled with a blockade of Sihanoukville, the Cambodian port that was part of the Ho Chi Minh trail apparatus on the west coast of Cambodia.

Plus one other tactic: Kissinger suggested to his staff that the interdiction bombing use tactical nuclear weapons for overland passes near the Chinese border. But the use of tactical nukes would have created an even greater domestic disturbance than the Cambodian invasion had done. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird objected to the whole agenda. He said it would not be effective and it would create too much domestic strife.

**Backing Up Threats**

So Nixon and Kissinger decided on something short of the nuclear option. After all, Nixon had sent a veiled ultimatum to Hanoi about “great consequence and force.” They had to back it up. The two decided on a worldwide nuclear alert instead, a giant nuclear war exercise that would simulate actual military maneuvers in attempting to mimic what the U.S. would do if it were preparing for a nuclear strike.

As Burr and Kimball write, this was another outmoded vestige of 1950s Cold War thinking: “It was intended to signal Washington’s anger at Moscow’s support of North Vietnam and to jar the Soviet leaders into using their leverage to induce Hanoi to make diplomatic concessions.” (Burr and Kimball, Chapter 9)

It was designed to be detected by the Soviets, but not detectable at home. For instance, the DEFCON levels were not actually elevated. The alert went on for about three weeks, with all kinds of military maneuvers at sea and on land. Finally, Dobrynin called for a meeting. Kissinger was buoyant. Maybe the ploy had worked.

But it didn’t. The ambassador was angry and upset, but not about the alert. He said that while the Russians wanted to deal on nuclear weapons, Nixon was as obsessed with Vietnam as LBJ was. In other words, Dobrynin and the Soviets were perceptive about what was really happening. Nixon tried to salvage the meeting with talk about how keeping American fatalities low in Vietnam would aid
détente, which further blew the cover off the nuclear alert.

Burr and Kimball show just how wedded the self-styled foreign policy maven were to the Madman Theory. After the meeting, Nixon realized he had not done well in accordance with the whole nuclear alert, Madman idea. He asked Kissinger to bring back Dobrynin so they could play act the Madman idea better.

The authors then note that, although Haiphong was later mined, the mining was not effective, as Nixon had been warned. In other words, the Madman idea and linkage were both duds.

Nixon and Kissinger then turned to Laird’s plan, a Vietnamization program, a mix of U.S. troop withdrawals, turning more of the fighting over to the ARVN, and negotiations. The November 1969 Madman timetable was tossed aside and the long haul of gradual U.S. disengagement was being faced. Accordingly, Nixon and Kissinger started sending new messages to the north. And far from isolating Hanoi, both China and Russia served as messengers for these new ideas.

The White House told Dobrynin that after all American troops were out, Vietnam would no longer be America’s concern. In extension of this idea, America would not even mind if Vietnam was unified under Hanoi leadership.

Kissinger told the Chinese that America would not return after withdrawing. In his notebooks for his meeting with Zhou En Lai, Kissinger wrote, “We want a decent interval. You have our assurances.” (Burr and Kimball, Epilogue)

**Timing the Departure**

But when would the American troops depart? As Ken Hughes writes, Nixon at first wanted the final departure to be by December of 1971. But Kissinger talked him out of this. It was much safer politically to have the final withdrawal after the 1972 election. If Saigon fell after, it was too late to say Nixon’s policies were responsible. (*Fatal Politics*, p. 3)

Kissinger also impressed on Nixon the need not to announce a timetable in advance. Since all their previous schemes had failed, they had to have some leverage for the Paris peace talks.

But there was a problem. The exposure of the secret bombing of Cambodia began to put pressure on Congress to begin to cut off funding for those operations. Therefore, when Nixon also invaded Laos, this was done with ARVN troops. It did not go very well, but that did not matter to Nixon: “However Laos comes out, we have got to claim it was a success.” (Hughes, p. 14)

While there was little progress at the official negotiations, that too was
irrelevant because Kissinger had arranged for so-called “secret talks” at a residential home in Paris. There was no headway at these talks until late May 1971. Prior to this, Nixon had insisted on withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam.

But in May, Kissinger reversed himself on two issues. First, there would be no American residual force left behind. Second, there would be a cease-fire in place. That is, no withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops. As Kissinger said to Nixon, they would still be free to bomb the north, but “the only problem is to prevent the collapse in 1972.” (ibid, pgs. 27-28) The Decent Interval strategy was now the modus operandi.

And this strategy would serve Nixon’s reelection interests, too. As Kissinger told Nixon, “If we can, in October of ’72 go around the country saying we ended the war and the Democrats wanted to turn it over to the communists then we’re in great shape.” To which Nixon replied, “I know exactly what we’re up to.” (ibid, p. 29) Since this was all done in secret, they could get away with a purely political ploy even though its resulted in the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians. All this was done to make sure Nixon was reelected and the Democrats looked like wimps.

Kissinger understood this linkage between the war’s illusionary success and politics. He reminded Nixon, “If Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam go down the drain in September of 1972, they they’ll say you went into those … you spoiled so many lives, just to wind up where you could have been in the first year.” (ibid, p. 30)

In fact, the President’s February 1972 trip to China was directly related to the slow progress on Vietnam. Kissinger said, “For every reason, we’ve got to have a diversion from Vietnam in this country for awhile.” To which Nixon replied, “That’s the point isn’t it?” (ibid, p.32)

**A Decent Interval**

In preparations for China, Kissinger told Zhou En Lai that Nixon needed an interval of a year or two after American departure for Saigon to fall. (ibid, p. 35) He told Zhou, “The outcome of my logic is that we are putting a time interval between the military outcome and the political outcome.” (ibid, p. 79)

But aware of this, Hanoi made one last push for victory with the Easter Offensive of 1972. Remarkably successful at first, air power managed to stall it and then push it back. During this giant air operation, Nixon returned to his Foster Dulles brinksmanship form, asking Kissinger, should we “take the dikes out now?”
Kissinger replied, “That will drown about 200,000 people.”

Nixon said, “Well no, no I’d rather use a nuclear bomb. Have you got that ready?”

When Kissinger demurred by saying Nixon wouldn’t use it anyway, the President replied, “I just want you to think big Henry, for Christ’s sake.” (Burr and Kimball, Epilogue)

The American press took the wrong message from this. What it actually symbolized was that Saigon could not survive without massive American aid and firepower. (Hughes, p. 61) But even with this huge air campaign, the Pentagon figured that the north could keep up its war effort for at least two more years, even with interdiction bombing.

The political ramification of the renewed fighting was that it pushed the final settlement back in time, which Nixon saw as a political benefit, a tsunami for his reelection.

Nixon: “The advantage, Henry, of trying to settle now, even if you’re ten points ahead, is that that will ensure a hell of a landslide.”

Kissinger: “If we can get that done, then we can screw them after Election Day if necessary. And I think this could finish the destruction of McGovern” [the Democratic presidential nominee].

Nixon: “Oh yes, and the doves, which is just as important.”

The next day, Aug. 3, 1972, Kissinger returned to the theme: “So we’ve got to find some formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which, after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater no one will give a damn.” (Hughes, pgs. 84-85)

All of this history renders absurd the speeches of Ronald Reagan at the time: “President Nixon’s idealism is such that he believes the people of South Vietnam should have the opportunity to live under whatever form of government they themselves choose.” (Hughes, p. 86) While Reagan was whistling in the dark, the Hanoi negotiator Le Duc Tho understood what was happening. He even said to Kissinger, “reunification will be decided upon after a suitable interval following the signing.”

Kissinger and Nixon even knew the whole election commission idea for reunification was a joke. Kissinger called it, “all baloney. There’ll never be elections.” Nixon agreed by saying that the war will then resume, but “we’ll be gone.” (ibid, p. 88)
Thieu’s Complaint

The problem in October 1972 was not Hanoi; it was President Thieu. He understood that with 150,000 North Vietnamese regulars in the south, the writing was on the wall for his future. So Kissinger got reassurances from Hanoi that they would not use the Ho Chi Minh Trail after America left, though Kissinger and Nixon knew this was a lie. (ibid, p. 94)

When Thieu still balked, Nixon said he would sign the agreement unilaterally. How badly did Kissinger steamroll Thieu? When he brought him the final agreements to sign, Thieu noticed that they only referred to three countries being in Indochina: Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam. Kissinger tried to explain this away as a mistake. (Hughes, p. 118)

When Kissinger announced in October 1972 that peace was at hand, he understood this was false but it was political gold.

Nixon: “Of course, the point is, they think you’ve got peace. . . but that’s all right,. Let them think it.” (ibid, p. 132)

Nixon got Senators Barry Goldwater and John Stennis to debate cutting off aid for Saigon. This got Thieu to sign. (ibid, p. 158)

In January 1973, the agreement was formalized. It was all a sham. There was no lull in the fighting, there were no elections, and there was no halt in the supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. As the military knew, Saigon was no match for the Viet Cong and the regular army of North Vietnam. And Thieu did not buy the letters Nixon wrote him about resumed bombing if Hanoi violated the treaty.

But Nixon had one more trick up his sleeve, which he pulled out as an excuse for the defeat in his 1985 book, No More Vietnams. He wrote that Congress lost the “victory” he had won by gradually cutting off aid to Indochina beginning in 1973. (Nixon, p. 178)

It’s true that the Democratic caucuses did vote for this, but anyone can tell by looking at the numbers that Nixon could have sustained a veto if he tried. And, in fact, he had vetoed a bill to ban American bombing in Cambodia on June 27 with the House falling 35 votes short in the override attempt.

Rep. Gerald Ford, R-Michigan, rose and said, “If military action is required in Southeast Asia after August 15, 1973, the President will ask congressional authority and will abide by the decision that is made by the House and Senate.”

The Democrats didn’t buy Ford’s assurance. So Ford called Nixon and returned to the podium to say Nixon had reaffirmed his pledge. With that, the borderline
Republicans joined in a shut-off vote of 278-124. In the Senate the vote was 64-26. (Hughes, p. 165)

Having Congress take the lead meant that Nixon did not have to even think of revisiting Vietnam. He could claim he was stabbed in the back by Congress. As Hughes notes, it would have been better for Congress politically to double the funding requests just to show it was all for show.

As Hughes writes, this strategy of arranging a phony peace, which disguised an American defeat, was repeated in Iraq. President George W. Bush rejected troop withdrawals in 2007 and then launched “the surge,” which cost another 1,000 American lives but averted an outright military defeat on Bush’s watch. Bush then signed an agreement with his hand-picked Iraqi government, allowing American troops to remain in Iraq for three more years and passing the disaster on to President Barack Obama.

Hughes ends by writing that Nixon’s myth of a “victory” in Vietnam masks cowardice for political courage and replaces patriotism with opportunism. Nixon prolonged a lost war. He then faked a peace. And he then schemed to shift the blame onto Congress.

As long as that truth is masked, other presidents can play politics with the lives hundred of thousands of innocent civilians, and tens of thousands of American soldiers.

At Nixon’s 1994 funeral, Kissinger tried to commemorate their legacy by listing their foreign policy achievements. The first one he listed was a peace agreement in Vietnam. The last one was the airing of a human rights agenda that helped break apart the Soviet domination in Eastern Europe. These two books make those declarations not just specious, but a bit obscene.

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