

Journal of
Social and Administrative Sciences

www.kspjournals.org

Volume 3

June 2016

Issue 2

Too Much Idealism? Ferguson, Kissinger, and the Vietnam War

By Clark JOHNSON [†]

Abstract. Ferguson provides evidence from Kissinger's early academic writings involving Kantian philosophy and nineteenth century diplomacy, but continuing much later, that his subject was not the one-dimensional realist many have taken him to be. Kissinger was in fact a Kantian idealist, thought Prince Metternich to be backward-looking, and had serious reservations about the thrust of Bismarck's power politics... Ferguson's account of his record regarding Vietnam during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations demonstrates that Kissinger never opposed overall war strategy, although he made tactical criticisms of it. Ferguson and Kissinger both neglect evidence that Kennedy was moving in an opposite direction regarding Vietnam, and that serious intra-Vietnam peace talks were underway in 1963. Such neglect leaves a misleading impression about historical alternatives Ferguson's account provides much evidence that Kissinger's, and US, expectations for what might be obtained at the negotiating table in 1967-68 were unrealistic—this is a cardinal criticism of Kissinger and Nixon's performance... Kissinger's premises for continuing in Vietnam were usually geopolitical, rather than based on careful understanding of what was happening on the ground; and his view of power relations, at least during the 1950s and 1960s, gave insufficient attention to the role of nonaligned countries in contributing to international stability. Also, Kissinger thought maintaining US credibility an almost independent rationale for continuing the war effort. Credibility arguments work best, however, where their advocates are otherwise on the right side of history. Just as the US security framework survived concessions to avoid nuclear war over Berlin or Cuba, it would survive the post-Vietnam consequence that troop commitments would henceforth be severely limited. The Kissinger-Nixon approach to Vietnam suffered from too little foreign policy realism, not too much.

Keywords. Niall Ferguson, Henry Kissinger, John F. Kennedy, Charles DeGaulle, Hans Morgenthau, Vietnam War.

JEL. F50, F52, F59.

1. Introduction

Ferguson's recent biography of Henry Kissinger self-consciously follows R.G. Collingwood's premise that history is "a re-enactment of a past thought, [e]ncapsulated in a context of present thoughts..." (Ferguson, 2015;¹ p. xvi). The subject, Kissinger, has sought historical and intellectual precedent for his arguments and his policies to an extent that makes him unusual among foreign policy practitioners. Ferguson evaluates Kissinger's record in this context, and Kissinger presumably expects as much. Ferguson has requisite background in intellectual history and in past and present diplomatic complexities

^{a†} Senior Advisor, US Dept. of Defense, 2009-2014. USA.

☎. 1-413-626-4819

✉. hcj8588@yahoo.com

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

to attempt such a task. He has also devoured reams of archival evidence, and has taken in Kissinger's published and most of his unpublished writings. His descriptions of various settings from Kissinger's biography – including Nazi Germany in the 1930s, upper Manhattan before World War II, the US Army during and after the war, Harvard University as a student and faculty member, various official consulting roles, and Kennedy and Johnson Administration politics in Washington -- are colorful and absorbing.

Ferguson reaches the conclusion that Kissinger was not always a foreign policy "realist;" indeed, his academic background included embrace of a very ethics-driven framework from German idealism. Ferguson's case is that such study was not merely an academic interlude, but in fact played a role in building his policy arguments for decades to come. A weakness in Ferguson's account rests in some of his own judgments about Kissinger's academic and public life; he has a tendency to defend Kissinger's role even where his own narrative points toward harsher conclusions. But these are quibbles, inasmuch as Ferguson opens new information and perspectives about diplomatic complexities Kissinger confronted and in turn influenced. This review highlights Kissinger's views on US policy in Vietnam in the years before he was named President Richard Nixon's chief foreign policy advisor at the end of 1968.

2. Idealism and Realism

An organizing theme for Ferguson is that Kissinger was originally a philosophical idealist and always retained a core of idealism. This is unexpected, not least because Kissinger has called himself a realist, an advocate of unsentimental pursuit of the national interest, for as long as almost anyone can remember. Kissinger has never viewed himself as a Wilsonian idealist, who wanted to bring democracy or self-determination as a policy priority. He had no interest in conservative idealism, for example of the kind represented by Russia's Alexander I at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Nor has he ever been receptive to Neo-Conservatism, whether of its anti-Soviet variety in the 1970s or to the transformative, anti-Islamist version of the past decade and a half.

As an undergraduate at Harvard during 1947-1950, Kissinger was enrolled in political science, but read voraciously in the history of ideas. Kissinger's advisor, Professor Bill Elliott, encouraged him to study Immanuel Kant, around whose ethical framework much of his 380-page thesis, *The Meaning of History*, would be organized. For Ferguson, the theme of Kissinger's idealism is almost new in the literature, and its near-absence has "vitiating severely, if not fatally, the historical judgments" many have passed (p.28), and it is important enough to include in the book's title.² It merits summary here.

Kantian "idealism" connotes that properties we discover in objects depend on the way that those objects appear to us as perceiving subjects, in space and time, and not as something they possess "in themselves", apart from our experience. This framework is sufficient to overcome skepticisms of Berkeley and Hume, to restore contact with real objects, and to account for "causality" and "necessity" as they are recognized in modern science. But it does not tell us how aesthetics, religion, and (especially) free moral action can be understood: that is, how can the same behavior be both scientifically determined and freely chosen? The answer is that we cannot know with certainty in a given instance whether free will is exercised, but we can posit that it might be, and we are therefore obligated as moral agents to try to exercise it.³

Given the potential for moral action - which Kissinger wanted to use to define meaning in history - what might realize it? Kant established that as moral agents

we seek to act in accord with duty; and we can will that a maxim for carrying out such duty should become a universal ethical requirement (hence, a “categorical imperative”) - thereby resolving the earlier puzzle by making the same act, driven now by an ideal, both determined and free. This conception is formal, hence it does not tell us what the specific, or substantive, imperatives might be - yet substantive imperatives are what philosophers, including Kant, often want to find. Such maxims, if we could derive them, would be very helpful in making political and historical judgements. Kissinger butted up against the difficulty of identifying such substantive maxims in his thesis. He wrote, for example:

The categorical imperative provides the frame-work for Kant’s philosophy of history. If the transcendental experience of freedom represents the condition for the apprehension of the greater truth at the core of all phenomenal appearances, then its maxims must constitute norms in the political field... the possibility of the categorical imperative results from its very conception not from its relation to empirical reality.” (Kissinger, 1950: pp. 262-263)

Much of Kissinger’s thesis was devoted to explaining that such thinkers as Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler (who were not working in a Kantian framework) did not succeed in finding maxims that could inject judgements into history, or, as he put it, that could “expand the philosophy of history into a guide for guaranteeing the attainability of the moral law.” Kissinger tried to find such a Kantian maxim – for example, in a requirement to work for eternal peace -- but concluded that Kant had not succeeded. (p. 240)

[Thus arises] the dilemma inherent in all philosophy...: the connection between the necessary and the possible. It is a problem which Kant too considered and failed to solve completely. In order to establish the validity of his categorical imperative as a foundation of eternal peace, Kant was forced to demonstrate the possibility of its application. But his proof of feasibility became a dictum of necessity and seems to negate the moral basis of the categorical imperative.” (Kissinger, 1950; p. 123)

Kant failed in that task because a categorical imperative is meaningless if derived in the abstract, or in personal isolation. Kant’s deeper argument was that such duty-driven imperatives had no status outside a community of moral agents through which maxims might be derived and “made applicable” (Kissinger, 1950, p. 123). Six decades later, in *World Order*, Kissinger again dismissed peace-seeking as a maxim that could be directly applied. He went on, for similar reasons, to reject proposals in Kant’s 1795 essay *On Eternal Peace* for a “perfect civil union of mankind” as representing brashness to the point of *hubris* in the power of reason. (Kissinger, 2014b; p. 40)

While Kissinger could not derive specific political maxims from Kantian ethics, he gained from his study, first, the perspective that one can genuinely experience freedom in “inwardly confronting” options, or “as a process of deciding [among] meaningful alternatives” (p.869). For example, more than a quarter-century after *The Meaning of History*, Kissinger was still citing Kant to explain an opposition between two imperatives, the obligation to defend freedom and the necessity for coexistence with adversaries (p.28). Later, especially during the Vietnam War, he would set domestic justice within contested countries against geopolitical goals. Second, his experience of such inward freedom led him to emphasize the importance of discourse and “ideals.” On this basis, he would choose a system that advanced freedom even if curtailing it would increase material welfare and efficiency (pp. 242-243). Ferguson at one point calls Kissinger a “dogmatic anti-materialist” (p. 803).

A critic could say that his Kantian framework is where Kissinger went off-track. Ferguson comments that Kissinger showed no interest whatever in the idealism of Hegel (p.29), although he does not tell us whether Kissinger rejected Hegel after

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

reading him, or whether perhaps Professor Elliott discouraged him from engaging Hegel in the first place. In fact, Kantian idealism's incomplete capacity to reconcile scientific necessity with moral freedom did much to incubate post-Kantian German idealisms. Kissinger wanted to understand freedom, and "meaning," in history, inside Time. Kant, finally, could not help much with that. As the great French Hegelian Alexandre Kojève explained in the 1930s:

To the extent that there is [in Kant] ... [an] act of freedom, the relation to time is accomplished 'before' Time. The act of freedom, while being related to Time, is therefore outside of Time. It is the renowned 'choice of the intelligible character.' The choice is not temporal, but it determines Man's whole temporal existence, in which, therefore, there is no freedom.... Man, as historical being, remains inexplicable. The history he creates by temporal free acts is not understood." (Kojève, 1969; pp. 129-130)

A much older Kissinger reached similar conclusions, but without linking them to an Hegelian framework. He wrote that we could not discover historical meaning through reflection or declaration - which is essentially what Kant wanted to do - but only by facing challenges as they arise in real events. (Kissinger, 2014b; p. 374). We can ask whether Kissinger's intellectual framework during his years in power would have been different had he grappled with such post-Kantian concepts during or soon after his student years at Harvard. A realist geopolitician-in-waiting might have learned more from reliving the dialectic of ideologies in history than from consideration of inner freedom and the juxtaposition of extra-temporal ideals.

Ferguson often sets Hans Morgenthau, the leading foreign policy realist of the post-WWII generation, as a counterpoint to Kissinger.⁴ In contrast to Kissinger's Kantian influence, Morgenthau during the mid- and late-1920s read nearly every word Friedrich Nietzsche ever published. Reflecting Nietzsche's influence, Morgenthau wrote in his diary in 1927 that "genuinely strong characters" accept life as it is. He wrote in a 1931 letter, "only adolescents cherish ideas about making the world a better place." Quoting Nietzsche directly, he added that to ascertain "what is and how it is, seems vastly nobler and much more responsible than any speculation about how it ought to be" (Morgenthau, 1936; p. 5). He reformulated this a few years later as "Je constate simplement ce que je vois" - I simply state what I see. In contrast to premises drawn from Kantian metaphysics, these aphorisms suggest the intellectual roots of a realist (Frei, 2001; pp. 101-102).

Ferguson's account of Kissinger's views on 19th century diplomacy is revisionist. Despite many impressions otherwise, Kissinger did not at all take Prince Klemens von Metternich as a role model, and while he admired Otto von Bismarck's diplomatic acumen, he also believed consequences of Bismarck's role on German history were very mixed.

Kissinger intended *A World Restored* (1957), based on his doctoral dissertation, as a work of history, not as a blueprint for his own exercise of power a decade-and-a-half later. The book's public reception emphasized the role of Metternich, Austria's foreign minister at the 1815 (post-Napoleon) Vienna conference and subsequently its chancellor. In *Diplomacy*, Kissinger (1994; pp. 82-83) explains that post-Napoleonic peace was maintained not through an arithmetic balance of power alone but also through shared values - that is, legitimacy. But Ferguson's evidence makes clear that, in Kissinger's view, Metternich's success was instrumental and manipulative; it was not creative, and (in Kantian language) was not based on the "superiority of its maxims" (p.302). Kissinger depicted Metternich as a rigid protagonist for "an illusory restoration of the old order," which was a battle against nationalism and liberalism (p.307). To underline the point, he described Metternich's face as "without depth," and his conversation as "brilliant but without ultimate seriousness" (p.293). The legitimacy, reflected in a "Holy

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Alliance” among Austria, Prussia and Russia, and directed against France, was backward-looking, and that version of European stability was not going to last. Ferguson indicates that Kissinger intended to complete a trilogy on 19th century diplomacy, with a central theme that Metternich’s stability carried the seeds of violent destruction a century later. He wrote that Metternich “lacked the capacity to contemplate an abyss, not with the detachment of a scientist, but as a challenge to be overcome – or to perish in the process” (pp. 302-303).

A more impressive diplomatic model from *A World Restored* was Lord Robert Stewart Castlereagh, the British foreign secretary at Vienna. Castlereagh urged Britain to play an ongoing role not as an active participant in Europe – a role left to continental powers –but as an offshore balancer. As a down payment on his concept, when he arrived in Vienna he discarded his instructions from London, dissolved the victorious wartime coalition, and demanded moderation toward post-Napoleonic France. Britain had fought against Napoleon “for security not for doctrine, against universal conquest not against revolution” (p. 306-307). Kissinger saw Castlereagh’s conception of offshore balancer as a framework for the US a century and a half later. Unfortunately for the future peace of Europe, Kissinger argues, Britain would play this role only fitfully. As early as the Aix-la-Chapelle conference of 1818, Britain had drawn back from Castlereagh’s vision, setting a tone for what was to come; his diplomatic instructions indicated that Britain was to interfere only in “great emergencies,” and otherwise to avoid “continental entanglements” (Kissinger, 1994; p. 89). Looking forward, Kissinger (1994; pp. 212-214) asserts that a forthright statement of British commitment in July 1914 might have dissuaded the German Kaiser from confrontation. Castlereagh was a tragic figure, as he killed himself in 1822, perhaps a casualty of frustration over his thwarted European agenda.

Europe had changed by the time Bismarck rose to prominence in the 1850s and became Prussia’s Minister-President in 1862. The revolutions of 1848 capsized the legitimacy of the restoration order nurtured by Metternich – who then resigned as the Austrian chancellor. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 allowed France to break out of its post-Vienna diplomatic isolation. The European order symbolized by Metternich could be represented metaphorically with an eighteenth century model of the universe as a great clock, tending toward harmony and balance. Bismarck’s new order and the unification of Germany in 1871 looked more like Darwinian survival of the fittest. Bismarck indicated that any state should value its opportunities over its principles – meaning it should coldly pursue its interests. However, as a superior practitioner of power, Bismarck also understood its limits, which distinguished him from many of his admirers and most of his successors (pp.697-698). While he preserved much of the traditional aristocracy in Prussia, he also introduced universal suffrage and social legislation – and the latter helped to stanch what had already been a millions-strong outflow of German emigration to America.

Because Bismarck was no longer constrained by an anti-revolutionary framework, Prussia under his direction could be closer to all of the contending European powers than any of the rest of them were to each other. This practice allowed Bismarck to maintain the peace of Europe for two decades following German unification. It was also to become a model for Kissinger as the Nixon administration reached for an opening to China and détente with the Soviet Union.

But Kissinger also found something disturbing about Bismarck’s legacy. The title of his *Daedal us* article - “The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck” - published in 1968, but written a decade earlier, suggested much. As we will see again, Kissinger dreaded revolution because of extreme measures that would be needed at some point to contain it. The obverse of Bismarck’s facility with the

calculus of power was disdain for Restoration concepts of legitimacy. Prussia's conservatives distrusted Bismarck from the outset. Ferguson has unearthed some unpublished manuscripts from the 1950s from which we learn that Kissinger at that time saw Bismarck's *Real politik* as dangerously immoral. In portentous language, Kissinger wrote--

... about the nature of the new world that [Bismarck] was conjuring up, a world in which only miscalculation was evil and only failure is a sin. It was a world without illusion in which only giants or nihilists could live. (p. 700)

... It was the essence of Bismarck's revolutionary quality that he drew the full consequences from his skepticism – that all belief became to him only factors to be manipulated. ... Thus the more Bismarck preached his doctrine the more humanly remote he became. The more rigorous he was in applying his lessons the more incomprehensible he became to his contemporaries. Nor was it strange that the conservatives gradually came to see in him the voice of the devil (p. 702).

Kissinger's unease continued. In *Real politik* terms, Bismarck failed because an effective successor would have to have similar skills in assessing power relations. Potential Bismarcks are always in short supply. Kissinger's study of Bismarck seems to have crystallized what he already considered in *A World Restored* – that a balance of power requires a leavening of legitimacy if it is to produce lasting stability. Kissinger did waver eventually from his early judgments, and Ferguson notes that at some point, probably during the 1960s, he deleted a particularly idealistic paragraph from his Bismarck manuscript (p. 874). Writing in 2011, Kissinger acknowledged that Bismarck was not indifferent to ideals:

Bismarck dominated because he understood a wider range of factors relevant to international affairs — some normally identified with power, others generally classified as ideals — than any of his contemporaries.

Bismarck is often cited as the quintessential realist, relying on power at the expense of ideals. He was, in fact, far more complicated. Power, to be useful, must be understood in its components, including its limits. By the same token, ideals must be brought, at some point, into relationship with the circumstances the leader is seeking to affect. Ignoring that balance threatens policy with either veering toward belligerence from the advocates of power or toward crusades by the idealists (Kissinger, 2011).

Ferguson does not consider this late judgement on Bismarck (at least not in Volume I); but his biography achieves much in calling attention to Kissinger's discomfort with unalloyed power seeking. Where he misleads somewhat is in his implication that other realists, including Morgenthau (Frei, 2001; p. 7), even including Bismarck, disdain ideals. But by the end of the current volume, Ferguson concludes that an effective statesman will find it possible to “zigzag” between the poles of idealism and realism. (pp. 873-874)

3. Kennedy and Vietnam

Ferguson devotes more pages to describing Kissinger's understanding of and activity with regard to unfolding events in Vietnam during the 1960s than to any other foreign policy topic. And while Kissinger's record in the Nixon and Ford administrations is far-reaching, historic judgment will weigh heavily on his and Nixon's Vietnam decisions. Ferguson's account of the years before he became National Security Advisor provides much context.

Ferguson reports that Kissinger in private was a “scathing critic” of Vietnam policy of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (p. 583). Kissinger, seeking some policy distance, told *Der Spiegel* in 2014, “You have to remember that the administration in which I served inherited the war in Vietnam” (Kissinger, 2014a). In November 1968, he said, inaccurately, “I never supported the war in

public” (p. 822). In fact, Ferguson records at least four previous instances in which Kissinger *did* publicly defend the war: a letter to the *NY Times* signed by 190 academics and participation in a Harvard v. Oxford debate in December 1965; another debate, this time at the University of North Carolina in June 1966; and a *Look* magazine interview later that year. (pp. 670-672)

As an advisor to the Kennedy Administration, he challenged the effectiveness of gradual escalation in Vietnam during 1961 and 1962, and criticized the decision to continue assistance to the Ngo Dinh Diem government absent “substantial” reform (pp. 588-589). Tactical criticisms aside, however, Ferguson’s evidence reinforces the conclusion that Kissinger never challenged the strategic wisdom of the US intervention or troop buildup in Vietnam. In March 1965, for example, he wrote to assure MacGeorge Bundy, the National Security Advisor under both Kennedy and Johnson (and who had been Kissinger’s dean at Harvard) that “I think our present actions in Vietnam are essentially right and to express my respect for the courage with which the Administration is acting”. Two weeks later, he wrote again to say “...the carping of some of your former colleagues at Harvard may create a misleading impression of unanimity [against the Administration’s policy]. I will look for an early opportunity to state my views publicly” (p. 623). Ferguson describes Kissinger generally as an “idealist committed to resisting Communist advance and an advocate of “limited war”” (p. 587).

Ferguson backs up his not-very-robust defense of Kissinger as an insightful critic of Vietnam policy with a harsh depiction of John F. Kennedy. The latter, he tallies, was a philanderer, unscrupulous in his political ethics, who sat out the censure vote on Senator Joseph McCarthy, fought dirty in the Cold War (including connivance in the 1963 coup and assassination plot against Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam,) and ran an ill-coordinated administration (pp. 514-515). Most of these ring true, but they miss what is essential, which were Kennedy’s efforts to reverse the escalation in Vietnam and to change the dynamic of Cold War diplomacy – perhaps to nurture détente a decade ahead of time, or even to end the Cold War altogether. Then-Congressman Kennedy travelled to Vietnam in 1951 during the French war there, and drew the conclusion that it would be very difficult for any Western power to win under such circumstances. In 1954, Vice President Nixon called for intervention, if necessary using tactical nuclear weapons, to support the imperiled French effort; Kennedy, by then a senator, argued publicly against intervention where he doubted even a “remote prospect of victory”. In 1957, in what was criticized as almost reckless, Kennedy spoke in the Senate against the French war in Algeria (Mahoney, 1983: pp. 15-20). As President, quietly but in a similar pattern, Kennedy maintained an extensive private correspondence with Premier Khrushchev beginning in September 1961 and initiated efforts through a third party to open communication with Cuba’s Castro beginning in October 1963 (Douglas, 2010).⁵

John Newman (1992; p. 453) describes this key 1961 decision of the Kennedy Administration regarding Vietnam:

Kennedy’s final decision – NSAM (National Security Action Memorandum) 111, issued on November 22, 1961 – against intervention, was arrived at after all the arguments for it that could be made had been mustered: when the intelligence unequivocally showed the battlefield situation was desperate, when all his top advisors agreed that the fate of Vietnam hung in the balance, and when most of them believed that vital US interests in the region and the world were at stake. Clearly, then, it was *the major Vietnam decision of his presidency*, drawing, as it did, a line that he never crossed. One of the principal theses of this work, derived from that decision, is that Kennedy would never have placed American combat troops in Vietnam. (Italics added.)

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Prior to NSAM-111, Kennedy sent General Maxwell Taylor to Vietnam for a first-hand look in October 1961. Taylor's original draft instructions for the trip included looking at whether to invoke SEATO provisions and whether to introduce US forces; Kennedy redrafted the instructions to remove both of these. Taylor's report on November 3, against the President's guidelines, called for deploying a combat force of 8,000; Defense Secretary McNamara followed up a few days later with a top-secret memo to the President calling for 205,000 troops – the demand for a large deployment was already there as early as 1961 (Parker, 2005; p. 370; FRUS, 1988). NSAM-111 rejected these requests (Logevall, 1999; p. 26f). Taylor acknowledged two decades later to Army historian Andrew Krepinevich that he went to Vietnam “knowing the President did not want a recommendation to send forces.”

Taylor's proposals left Kennedy blindsided, and nearly isolated among senior national security officials (Newman, 1992; pp. 135-136; Parker, 2005; pp. 369ff). In an effort to block the momentum in favor of escalation, he twice sent his Indian Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith to Vietnam to prepare contrary opinions; as Galbraith sardonically explained to his family, “[the President] sent me to Vietnam because he knew I did not have an open mind” (Galbraith, 2003).⁶ Kennedy told Galbraith during the latter's visit to Washington in November 1961:

There are limits to the number of defeats I can defend in one twelve-month period... I've had the Bay of Pigs, pulling out of Laos, and I can't accept a third.

Kennedy was also concerned about stirring a domestic replay of the “Who Lost China?” debate of a decade earlier (Reeves, 1993; p. 261). But it is likely that Galbraith's April 4, 1962, memo and subsequent meeting with Kennedy reinforced the latter's doubts about the war and led to McNamara's instruction in May 1962 to plan for withdrawal of 1,000 troops from Vietnam (Galbraith, 2003).

Kennedy's evolving strategic outlook was closely held. We know, for example, from the slow drip of information releases on the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that Kennedy's decision to trade removal of Soviet missiles in Cuba for removal of US Polaris missiles in Turkey was shared only narrowly even within the crisis Executive Committee (and did not include EXCOMM member Vice President Johnson). It was publicly denied, until acknowledged in 1982 by former Kennedy Administration figures in a *Time* magazine article. The other shoe dropped with the release of tape transcripts in 1987, which showed that the President was nearly alone in his decision, and that almost everyone else in the room -including McNamara and Robert Kennedy- adamantly objected to the trade. Fred Kaplan more recently speculates that “JFK himself was departing from the views of Kennedy men” (Kaplan, 2012). This narrative offers some background for understanding subsequent administrative disarray in executing Vietnam policy.

Newman offers evidence that Kennedy in early months of 1963 shared his intention to disengage from Vietnam within a limited circle that included O'Donnell, Galbraith, Senator Mike Mansfield, and probably McNamara, among others– but certainly did not include Rusk, Bundy, or Taylor (Newman, 1992; pp. 321-324)⁷. Reasons for such guardedness were 1) accumulating evidence, persuasive to Kennedy by February or March 1963, that military and intelligence officials, led by Generals Taylor and Paul Harkins, were feeding him a deliberately optimistic picture of progress in Vietnam in order to force his hand (Newman, 1992; p. 320); and 2) Kennedy's certainty that airing his doubts about Vietnam would be politically perilous going into the 1964 presidential campaign.

Kennedy endorsed National Security Memorandum (NSM) 263 on October 2, 1963, which called for withdrawal of 1,000 US troops by year's end. But the 1,000 troops were only a first step toward withdrawal of most US forces within just over

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

two years. Kennedy also directed Taylor, by then Joint Chiefs Chairman, to send a memorandum to services' heads, dated October 4, indicating:

The program currently in progress to train Vietnamese forces will be reviewed and accelerated as necessary to insure that all essential functions visualized to be required for the projected operational environment, to include those now performed by U.S. military units and personnel, can be assumed properly by the Vietnamese by the end of calendar year 1965. *All planning will be directed towards preparing RVN forces for the withdrawal of all U.S. special assistance units and personnel by the end of calendar year 1965.* (Galbraith, 2003) (Italics added.)

Ferguson leaves the misleading impression that initiative for this directive came from McNamara and Taylor, and hence lacked the strategic import of a presidential policy to withdraw from Vietnam. (In fact, following Kennedy's assassination on November 22, Taylor and McNamara led the policy reversal *against* the withdrawal directives (Newman, 1992; pp. 434-435). Ferguson then argues that the *coup d'état* of November 1, 1963, against South Vietnam President Diem tied the US to Diem's successors and hence left Kennedy implicitly responsible for the escalation of the US role even after his death (p. 590). Ferguson's view puts him on a page with Kissinger, who, notwithstanding his previous harsh criticism of Diem, wrote in a memo to his political patron Nelson Rockefeller in late October:

If we undermine the Diem regime, we are really doing the Viet Cong's work for them... A public announcement by Secretary McNamara that we would withdraw 1,000 troops by the end of this year and the remainder by 1965 must give comfort to the Vietcong (p. 592).

The Diem coup showed the Kennedy Administration in disarray, with sharp differences among State, Defense, and CIA. But countervailing evidence indicates that the most important decisions lay in the future, going into 1965 (Logevall, 1999; pp. 73-74, 376). Kennedy's planned troop withdrawal was intended to move ahead despite the Diem coup, and notwithstanding the continued deterioration in the military situation during November. Newman cites three public items to corroborate this case. 1) In Kennedy's press conference of November 14, he placed "bring[ing] Americans home" at the top of his objectives in Vietnam – the highest public priority he had ever given it. 2) In the same press statement, there was no provision for "winning the war" – a change from previous press conferences, including the most recent of September 12. He instead referred "to permitting democratic forces in the country to operate" – a formulation "only a step away" from that of the Laos neutrality agreement of 1962. And 3) the secrecy requirement was lifted from the 1,000-man withdrawal announcement (Newman, 1992; pp. 423-424, 426-427).

Important studies of this topic, in addition to Newman's, include Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation* (Jones, 2003), James W Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable* (Douglas, 2010), and James Galbraith's *Exit Vietnam* (Galbraith, 2003) – this list is incomplete. Interesting corroborative evidence can be found in Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect* (1995), Peter Dale Scott, *War Conspiracy* (1972), Kenneth O'Donnell, *Johnny: We Hardly Knew Ye* (1972), Parker's (2005) biography of John Kenneth Galbraith, Ambassador Galbraith's (1969 and 1982) memoirs, and in Arthur Schlesinger's interviews with Jacqueline Kennedy in the spring of 1964. Mrs. Kennedy emphasized a full year before the 1965 troop buildup that Lyndon Johnson did not share her late husband's views on Indochina, and she thought it likely that he (Johnson) would make a hash of it (Kennedy, 2011). Of these, only McNamara's book is included in Ferguson's otherwise extensive bibliography, while James Galbraith's article is cited in a footnote (p. 910 n128).

Ferguson also omits what may have been the most important consequence of the Diem coup. Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was also assassinated in the November coup, had been leading secret negotiations during the summer of 1963 with the Viet Cong and Hanoi, toward the goal of reaching an intra-Vietnam agreement that would include a US departure. French President Charles DeGaulle, by-passing Washington, directed his Ambassador Lalouette to build on efforts already underway in order to promote the concept of neutralization with the Diem brothers – who were receptive. There is plausible evidence that the Viet Cong and Hanoi did not launch an offensive that summer in the face of Buddhist agitation against Diem because they did not want to upset negotiations (Jones, 2003; pp. 310-313, 344-346). On August 29, DeGaulle publicly announced the French initiative, which drew diplomatic support from India, Poland, Italy and the Vatican. Kennedy responded in a TV interview with Walter Cronkite a few days later that the US was not interested - an answer likely intended to deflect criticism from hardliners at home. The very credible Vietnam journalist and historian Bernard Fall, based on discussions with Ho Chi Minh and other DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) officials, declared in late September 1963 that Hanoi was then amenable to a delay in reunification. The alternative – war with the US – would have cost Hanoi its delicately sustained independence vis-à-vis China (Logevall, 1999; p. 348).

Although some in Washington considered such an initiative to be a betrayal of trust, Ambassador Nolting wanted the talks to continue, and apparently persuaded the White House not to interfere. Ambassador Galbraith, who was trying early in 1963 to advance the negotiations from his post in New Delhi, indicated in his memoirs that Kennedy encouraged his efforts (Galbraith, 1982; p. 478). Interest in a settlement continued even after the assassinations of the Diems and Kennedy. Senators Mansfield and Richard Russell advised President Johnson to embrace DeGaulle's call for a neutral Vietnam (Logevall, 1992; pp. 81-82⁸); the influential journalist Walter Lippmann met with DeGaulle in December 1963, then endorsed the latter's plan in-person to Johnson on his return to the US (Logevall, 1992; pp. 97-99). Rejecting such advice, Johnson soon cast his lot with hardliners. In post-Dallas discussions with Rockefeller, Kissinger encouraged a more aggressive posture in Vietnam, and appears not to have mentioned the DeGaulle initiative (pp. 598-602).

DeGaulle's motives were mixed; even a failed effort to settle the Vietnam War would raise France's diplomatic profile. His efforts to bring about neutralization agreements continued during 1964 and 1966 (pp. 704-705). Had the 1963 diplomacy succeeded, US forces might have been asked to leave Vietnam, thereby saving infinite trouble – but frustrating some American Cold Warriors. We may speculate about what Kissinger's position would have been – he does not mention the Nhu-Hanoi talks in his memoirs or in *Diplomacy*. We know from his efforts to find negotiating partners on behalf of the Johnson Administration during 1966 and 1967 that Kissinger would have been receptive to efforts to use third- or fourth-party leverage to advance negotiations, and he was more sympathetic to DeGaulle's geopolitical revisionism than were most in Washington (Kissinger, 1965). But given his view of the dynamics of international communism, and his reservations about the earlier neutrality agreement in Laos, it seems unlikely that Kissinger would have embraced a neutrality solution in Vietnam in 1963. In the event, Kennedy replaced Ambassador Nolting with Republican Henry Cabot Lodge in August of that year – a switch made in part to give Vietnam policy a bipartisan cover. Based on cable traffic, Lodge and other US officials were suspicious about what the Diems might negotiate with Hanoi (Newman, 1992; p. 384); the *NY Times* suggested that fear of a Gaullist neutralization of Vietnam lay behind US support

for the ouster of Diem (Logevall, 1992; pp. 85-86⁹). This interpretation of events carries the implication that Lodge and his fellow coup plotters were acting without full buy-in from Kennedy.

Kissinger's own writings years and decades after the events parallel Ferguson's incomplete account of the aftermath of the Diem and Kennedy assassinations. Kissinger leaves out complexities in Kennedy's position on Vietnam, and makes little effort to look behind public statements. For example, in Kissinger's account, the 1961 decision (NSAM-111) reinforced "momentum... clearly all in the direction of further [troop] increases, as Kennedy had not changed his assessment of what was at stake." And he asserts that when Kennedy was assassinated "more [US military personnel] were in the pipeline" (Kissinger, 2003; pp. 33-34)¹⁰—thereby dismissing the October 1963 decisions to withdraw troops

In another sense, Ferguson is correct. For two decades, the world was led to believe that Kennedy had gone "eyeball to eyeball" with Soviet Premier Khrushchev during the 1962 missile crisis – and *won*. Kennedy wanted the agreement over missiles in Turkey to remain secret, in part so as not to raise concerns about US commitments in NATO and elsewhere. The misleading impression would for years to come underlie a case for a strong response in Vietnam and elsewhere. Indeed, Kennedy publicly made the case for holding the line in Vietnam, despite privately, almost secretly, planning for extrication. His vice president was not privy to his thinking on either the missile crisis or Vietnam (Kennedy probably intended to replace Johnson on the ticket in 1964 (Caro, 2012)). Hardliners in and outside the Administration were encouraged. For example, Deputy National Security Advisor Walt Rostow – who was not a member of the October 1962 EXCOMM¹¹ – drew the incorrect lesson from the Cuban missile crisis "that the communists do not escalate in response to our actions" (p. 587).

In his defense, and not mentioned by Ferguson, Kennedy did telegraph a shift in direction in his commencement address at American University in June 1963. In a substantial change from Cold Warrior themes of his 1961 Inaugural Address, Kennedy now asked that "every thoughtful citizen who despairs of war and wishes to bring peace, should begin by looking inward – by examining his own attitude toward the possibilities of peace, toward the Soviet Union, toward the course of the cold war and toward freedom and peace here at home." Its emotional thrust was to prepare for an end to the cold war – not to fight it, and certainly not to encourage Washington's hawks. This speech got more attention abroad than in the US; the Soviet Union allowed broadcast of the entire speech. In subsequent weeks, the US and Soviets reached agreement on the Test-Ban Treaty.

Kissinger surely understood stirrings toward a different direction in the cold war, but he was unmoved regarding strategy in Vietnam. As Morgenthau tartly put it in 1969: "I opposed the war, while Kissinger supported it" (p. 581). Why?

4. Kissinger's Early Views on Vietnam

For Kissinger, Vietnam was usually about geopolitics. In a 1955 piece for *Foreign Affairs*, he speculated that, despite the Geneva Agreement and French departure the year before, an "all-out American effort might still save Laos and Cambodia." He added that we should make sure that countries at risk have "indigenous governments of sufficient stability" to prevent Soviet subversion (p. 339). In memoranda to Rockefeller in February and April of 1962, Kissinger argued that failure to defend South Vietnam might have doleful consequences, and called for political and tactical measures to defeat the guerilla movement (pp. 588-

589). He remained forthright about his concerns over the advance of communist powers, and wrote after leaving office:

Washington policymakers had good reason to be concerned about the conquest of Indochina by a movement which had already engulfed eastern Europe and taken over China. Regardless of whether Communist expansion was centrally organized, it seemed to possess enough momentum to sweep the fragile new nations of Southeast Asia into the anti-Western camp. The real question was not whether some dominoes might fall in Southeast Asia, which was likely, but whether there might be a better place to draw the line (Kissinger, 2003; p. 19).

Kissinger wrote in 1950 that the Soviet Union was “an uncompromising revolutionary power – a power with whom no kind of peaceful equilibrium could be attained.” (p. 316) John Mearsheimer, an academic “offensive realist” of a later generation, made the somewhat different point that “no responsible Soviet leader would have passed up an opportunity to be Europe’s hegemon in the wake of World War II” (Mearsheimer, 2014; p. 198). (A revolutionary power is one that will not accept limits, and that cannot be reassured of its security, hence is outside the constraints of normal diplomacy. For a power to seek regional hegemony, by contrast, does not necessarily imply loosening of such constraints.) Yet Ferguson tells us that Kissinger, even before Stalin’s death in 1953, saw “mounting evidence” that the Soviet Union was becoming less revolutionary, and more a status-quo power (p.309). He wrote to his colleague Schlesinger in 1954 that while he thought peace would never “break out... so that tensions would magically disappear,” he nevertheless believed that it “would be [un]wise to fight any more Koreans” (pp. 323-324).

Ferguson notes, citing Kissinger, that Austria’s Metternich saw Restoration-era political crises in Spain, Naples and Piedmont as system-threatening menaces to his new order, demanding intervention. Foreign Secretary Castlereagh, meanwhile, understood Britain’s role as that of an offshore balancer, and hence was to engage in an ongoing process of adjustment – shifting its weight in favor of or against one small or large power against another. Kissinger argued in 1953, and frequently since then, that the US also should act as a British-style balancer (p. 321). Where the Austrian Metternich worried about uprisings in the periphery, for the British the greater danger was that intervention in distant places could *itself* cause systemic unbalance (pp. 307-308). There is no antecedent in this analysis for a large-scale intervention by America a century-and-a-half later in a location geographically removed from its vital interests!

Kissinger was also a critic of *military* containment against a revolutionary Soviet Union, which he felt was too demanding a strategy, as it forced the US to respond in settings of Moscow’s choosing (pp. 314-315). Kissinger came to prominence in the mid-1950s as an advocate of limited war as an alternatives to general nuclear war, including under some circumstances, limited nuclear war – including such weapons “clean and for tactical use” (p. 472). The psychology of the nuclear standoff was much on his mind, including concern that the threat even of limited nuclear war would lead US allies to re-calculate their interests and go over to the Soviet side. The need to calibrate threats, and to make nuclear threats credible, was paramount. Ferguson’s account also shows that Kissinger’s view of the Soviet Union stiffened, so that he by 1961 saw a need to stand up to Soviet encroachments anywhere and everywhere – even, apparently, in settings “not of Washington’s choosing.” To meet such heightened concerns, he told Rockefeller, the US needed to be prepared to go to general, rather than limited, war; “nuclear weapons,” he reassured, “have preserved civilization” (p. 472). For Kissinger,

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

diplomacy almost everywhere was becoming subsumed under requirements of US-Soviet relations.

A televised December 1965 debate was embarrassing, and revealing. Teamed with two Harvard Law students against future Labour Party leader Michael Foot and writer and journalist Tariq Ali representing Oxford, Kissinger said, “It is my belief that the United States should accept the [1954] Geneva settlement as a basis for the settlement of the present war... and it is my impression that the American Government has indicated its readiness to do so” (pp. 671-672). In fact, the 1954 settlement had called for the temporary division of Vietnam, with internationally supervised elections and reunification to follow. Because it opposed reunification, the US government had not signed the agreement, and the Johnson administration – which had blocked Vietnam neutralization talks in 1964 -- was not about to reverse policy. Good high school debaters would have known this much in December 1965. Oxford’s side won the debate. An obvious inference is that Kissinger’s support for the US war effort at that point had much to do with his power calculations elsewhere and very little to do with understanding of events in Vietnam.

Intertwined with Kissinger’s geopolitics, he was a political conservative, with a dread of the disorder and chaos that revolution might bring. In *World Order*, he argued that internal upheaval could “shake the international equilibrium more profoundly than aggression from abroad”. He added that “the more sweeping the change, the more violence is needed to reconstruct authority, without which society will disintegrate” (Kissinger, 2014b; p.41). Ferguson describes him in the 1950s and 1960s as a Burkean conservative, who understood history to be driven by nations and peoples – hence statesmen would have to draw on such forces to prevent chaos (p. 298).

In this context, Kissinger was also a reliable anti-communist, although he preferred to express it otherwise. From an interview with reporter Mike Wallace in 1958:

I believe, for instance, that we reacted very wrongly to the riot in Latin America [an illusion to the protests sparked by Vice President Nixon’s visits to Peru and Venezuela the previous May]. Rather than saying, “These are Communist-inspired and we must keep Latin America from going Communist,” we should have said, “This recalls us to our duty. These are things we want to do because of the values we stand for, not because we want to beat the Communists” (pp. 415-416).

The Kantian language of ethical decision is unmistakable. According to notes from an April 1961 meeting with Rockefeller, and in similar spirit, Kissinger allowed that opposing communism was a moral duty – one that would justify taking tens of thousands of lives in order to save millions that would be lost in the event of communist victories. Noting that communists would often advance using infiltration and subversion, he said it “was not our moral concept to act against it, but it should be... We can’t demand perfection before action... Let’s face up to the question of who[m] we support: let’s defend the bastards and reform them later” (pp. 472-473). Kissinger’s motivation regarding Vietnam rested significantly on concern about communism and insurrection – which, as Ferguson argues, had more to do with duty-driven idealism (misguided or not) than with the cynical realism often attributed to him. Kissinger’s commentaries on revolution and stability would be off-key coming from such less-ideological realists as DeGaulle, Morgenthau or Mearsheimer.

There is a larger question here that Ferguson does not and Kissinger did not sufficiently answer. Did pressure from the Soviet Union require that every part of the world be drawn into superpower competition? Was it really in the US’ interest

to pressure nonaligned countries to enter security agreements? To take one example, under a Dulles initiative, the US entered a bilateral security pact with Pakistan against the Soviet Union. But as nearly every account of Pakistan's history makes clear, its leadership was obsessed about competition with India, including in the Kashmir, and agreed to align itself with the US in order to obtain material and diplomatic support against India, not against the Soviet Union. An important consequence of the Pakistan pact was to put US diplomacy at loggerheads with post-colonial India, the world's largest non-aligned power – which almost inevitably led India to seek military and diplomatic support from the Soviets. Senator Kennedy had again opposed the thrust of US cold war policy in calling in 1958 for closer and more extensive ties with India (Parker, 2005; p. 379). His decision to send Galbraith to New Dehli in 1961 was a follow-up on his earlier interest in bringing about improved relations.

As further examples, US intervention against democratically elected governments in Iran (1953) and Guatemala (1954), and support for the assassination of similarly elected President Lumumba of the Congo at the end of the Eisenhower Administration were all driven by opposition to neutralism (Mahoney, 1983), or by the premise that nonalignment was an implicit boost to Soviet interests. Other evidence indicates US efforts to support right-leaning, pro-US factions in Italy and France during the 1950s and into the 1960s, either officially or through covert channels (Talbot, 2015). This way of thinking -- the expectation that every government should be lined up either with the US or, otherwise implicitly, against it -- lay at the heart of the urgency in US national security circles about supporting the Saigon-based government in Vietnam.

Kissinger views were nuanced enough for him to be sympathetic to Gaullist re-assertion of an independent French defense policy during the 1960s (pp. 704f, 717f). When the time arrived a few years later for “triangular” diplomacy with China and the Soviets, Kissinger proved adept at dealing with multi-polar geopolitics. But Ferguson's evidence leads us to the unexpected conclusion that Kissinger's thought-framework regarding the world's post-colonial periphery was implicitly bi-polar during most of the 1950s and 1960s. Ferguson's speaks of Kissinger in 1967 confronting the “absurd predicament of the US in Vietnam” (p. 727) – as though Kissinger had not himself argued in favor of deeper involvement at almost every turn. Kissinger and sometimes Ferguson depict Kennedy as a straightforward Cold Warrior, perhaps doing so as a buffer to soften the hardline nature of Kissinger's own preferences. Screening out Kennedy's new directions, and his decision to implement the first stage of withdrawal – not to mention omitting the multi-lateral 1963 initiative to negotiate an intra-Vietnam settlement -- leaves an impression that Kissinger faced a narrower set of choices regarding Vietnam policy, and was a more resourceful thinker, than were in fact the case.

5. Kissinger, Morgenthau and Negotiations

Morgenthau blasted the premises of official strategy, which were similar to Kissinger's premises. Like most realists, Morgenthau intended to navigate the world with its human flaws, and did not share Kissinger's fear of contagion from chaos and revolution. He noted:

If one probes beneath the rationalizations for our military presence in South Vietnam, one finds as the dominant motivation the fear that if South Vietnam should go Communist, [then] no nation threatened by Communism would entrust its protection to us... This theory... is unsupported by any historic evidence. The Soviet Union went Communist in 1917 and China in 1949, but no other nation followed suit. In 1945, Poland and Hungary went Communist, but Finland did not, and all the Balkan states went Communist,

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

but Greece did not. In 1948, Czechoslovakia went Communist, but no other nation did. In 1954 North Vietnam went communist all by itself, and in 1960 or so Cuba went communist without being followed by any other Latin American nation. Social and, more particularly, revolutionary change is not a mechanical result of imitation and prestige but of objective conditions peculiar to individual nations (Morgenthau, 1965; pp. 77-78).

Morgenthau wrote of telling South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem during a visit in 1955 that his governance was driving the population to political frustration and indifference, and that the only organized opportunity for opposition would be through the Communist underground. That is, it was Diem – not some congeries of international forces – that was making South Vietnam into a potential communist “domino” (Morgenthau, 1965; pp. 29-30). Diem’s draconian Decree 10/59, issued in May 1959, expanded the scope for arbitrary imprisonment and execution for “political crimes,” and led many marginal adherents of revolution into full-time support of the National Liberation Front (Elliott, 2003; pp. 101-105).

Morgenthau raised another argument against the Vietnam War, which is that it could only be fought by morally unacceptable methods. He wrote:

If the war in the South were to last long enough, we would have a good chance of winning it. We were not likely to win it in the traditional way by breaking the enemy’s will to resist, but rather by killing so many of the enemy that there is nobody left to resist.... Hence, the “body count,” however fictitious, becomes the sole measure of our success. No civilized nation can wage such a war without suffering incalculable moral damage (Morgenthau, 1969b; pp. 137-138).

Morgenthau’s scenario was not literally realized as South Vietnam’s population grew rapidly throughout the war, despite casualties. He meant that a war of the kind the US was fighting in Vietnam necessarily imposed heavy costs on the local population. Accounts do suggest that Saigon’s often improved military position in the years after the Tet Offensive of 1968 owed much to a policy of “draining the pond to catch the fish” -- a phrase used by both General Westmoreland and CIA Director Colby. It was a policy of using air power, artillery, and other military measures deliberately to create internal flight (Elliott, 2003; pp. 337-340).

Kissinger was consistent in his view that such moral and human rights considerations in Vietnam were trumped by geopolitical requirements. He told *Look* magazine in August 1966 that the war in Vietnam was “a crucial test of American maturity... We do not have the privilege of deciding to meet only those challenges which most flatter our moral preconceptions” (p. 672). He responded in his memoirs to a “proclamation of America’s immorality” from Morgenthau similar to the one above by observing: “In the post-World War II period, America had been fortunate to have never had to choose between its moral convictions and its strategic analysis” (Kissinger, 2003; p. 44). Kissinger thus falls back to his comfort zone, a Kantian choosing-among-conflicting-imperatives framework. It is weak response, as it implies that Morgenthau, a preeminent diplomatic scholar and, like Kissinger, a Jewish émigré from Europe during the 1930s, was unskilled at weighing moral against strategic imperatives.

Notwithstanding sympathy for his subject, Ferguson acknowledges that Kissinger was wrong about the Vietnam War and Morgenthau was right. Far from accepting Kissinger’s geopolitical concern about the expansion of the communist bloc, Morgenthau argued that a unified, nationalist Vietnam would be a constraint on Chinese power. To explain Kissinger’s failure, Ferguson goes back to his opening argument – that Kissinger was an idealist, who believed that South Vietnam’s geopolitical importance and its “right to self-determination” were worth American lives. Losing the argument with Morgenthau was, as Ferguson sees it,

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

part of Kissinger's education, a step toward becoming the more open realist he would become (pp. 822-823).

Morgenthau argued by June 1965 that it was too late simply to withdraw from Vietnam, because it would "do great damage to US prestige" (which he defined as its "reputation for power,") hence that the US must negotiate its withdrawal (Morgenthau, 1965; pp. 9, 79-80). His view appeared close to where Kissinger's had by then evolved, as the latter realized even before his first trip to Vietnam in October 1965 that chances for a military solution were vanishingly small. Indeed, as early as December 1965, McNamara had reached a similar view, and staggered Johnson by telling him privately that chances for a military victory were only between a third and 50 percent "no matter what we do" (p. 675). This juxtaposition of views suggests consensus on the need to negotiate an exit. Nevertheless, the US troop buildup, which had reached about 180,000 by end-1965, would treble to an early 1969 peak level at over 500,000 –yet still with no negotiated settlement in sight.

The apparent agreement was misleading, as it masked different views of what should be negotiated. Kissinger's meeting in September 1965 with John McNaughton, an assistant secretary of defense, was revealing. McNaughton indicated that in no scenario, and at no force level, were US chances of "winning" higher than 40 percent. In every case, he went on, the greatest probability went to a "compromise outcome which would have the essential characteristic of recognized VC [Viet Cong] areas". Kissinger, almost dumbfounded, replied that "the VC in these conditions might well take over the country". McNaughton, undeterred, replied that the US were going to have to abandon those it was supporting, and that if Kissinger wanted to be "really constructive", he could prepare a paper on the best way to do it (p. 635). Kissinger heard similar analyses from others, and was then bemused and appalled when General Westmoreland and others in Vietnam spun their briefings to tell him of battlefield and "pacification" successes (p. 649).

McNaughton briefed McNamara on the same discouraging data. But Defense civilians were constrained by senior military opinion, which loudly opposed scaling back war aims. Walt Rostow, soon to replace Bundy as national security advisor, supported military views against the civilians. Internal study findings were closely held, and considerations of alternatives inside the Johnson Administration was stilted (pp. 636-637); disarray regarding Vietnam policy had worsened from the already impaired level it had reached during the Kennedy Administration. The US war continued and intensified – ending in McNamara's departure from the Department of Defense, Johnson's decision not to run again, and election of a Republican president in 1968.

When Morgenthau recommended negotiations in 1965, he recognized the same facts on the ground that McNaughton had laid out to Kissinger. He advocated retreating to a few coastal bases, to maintain some negotiating leverage – and then essentially agreeing to Vietnamese reunification as a neutralist, but communist-dominated, state (Morgenthau, 1965; p. 80). He privately reiterated his view in October 1968, indicating that it would be impossible to liquidate the war "while maintaining one's original justifications for the war". The real issue, he added, "is who shall govern, the Communists or the opponents?" (p. 821-822).

DeGaulle's conclusions were similar to Morgenthau's – the forces of national self-determination could not be suppressed, so the US should withdraw and embrace neutralization (implicitly to include a communist-dominated government in the South) (Logevall, 1992; pp. 75-77). Ferguson notes that David Nes, briefly Lodge's deputy at the US Embassy in Saigon during 1964, "came to realize that DeGaulle was offering a choice preferable to military escalation" (pp. 705-706).

DeGaulle's agenda regarding Vietnam was unwelcome to many because, as someone at Quai D'Orsay explained to Kissinger in May 1965, it also served the geopolitical objective of reducing the American role in the world (p. 722). A reduced US role may have been a necessary pill to swallow. As Bismarck had understood a century earlier, Kissinger was later to observe that a balance of power requires "a common recognition of limits" (Kissinger, 2014b; p. 371). To take on an ideological war on the world's periphery perhaps exceeded those limits.

Ferguson sheds light on Washington's effort to begin negotiations with Hanoi during 1967. The Johnson Administration selected Kissinger to open negotiations with Hanoi using French intermediaries, but the effort went nowhere. There has been controversy over the years about why, with McNamara, among others, arguing later that the US administration was not committed to the effort. We now know from Vietnamese sources, Ferguson tells us, that Hanoi had no intention of making peace in 1967 (pp. 732-733). That is true, but also misleading. As DeGaulle, McNaughton and Morgenthau had by then argued for years, and as McNamara had already briefed Johnson, the US had little prospect of defeating North Vietnam militarily. The US had no reason to expect to obtain at the negotiating table what it had scant prospect of winning on the battlefield.

Kissinger's (1979) memoirs leave the impression that he and Nixon left no stone unturned to reach an agreement after their administration arrived in January 1969. He even described his own position, in November 1968, as "not very different" from Morgenthau's – which the latter disputed (p. 822). In fact, as Kissinger summarizes in *World Order*, the Administration had "one irreducible condition": it would not agree to begin negotiations by replacing the government of South Vietnam (Kissinger, 2014b; pp. 300-301). This reasonable-sounding condition actually ruled out negotiation for a settlement, just as it made contacts with Hanoi unlikely in 1967. Kissinger's subsequent accounts have not been accurate. Unmentioned in either his memoirs or in his 2014 book, Kissinger prepared a memorandum to Nixon in October 1972 (declassified in 2010) calling for two-party talks between the US and Hanoi, perhaps using the Soviet Union as an intermediary. The proposal implicitly acknowledges weakness of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), survival of which would have been an early casualty of such negotiations. Nixon shortly afterward wrote to RVN President Nguyen Van Thieu to tell him that Washington was going to reach an agreement with Hanoi, whether or not Thieu was on board (Woodward, 2015).¹² In these communications, Kissinger and Nixon evidently recognized what had been clear to others for at least a half-dozen years.

Looking ahead, Kissinger as national security advisor negotiated the Paris Accords with North Vietnam by January 1973, which in fact left the RVN government in place in Saigon. One view is that this agreement was a success for US diplomacy, and that pessimists were wrong. (Sorley, 1999; Kissinger, 2014b; p. 301)¹³ (In this view, the North Vietnamese takeover in 1975 followed on a collapse of US will to provide material or air support to its ally.) As we have learned more about Kissinger's and Nixon's own doubts in 1972 regarding the viability of the RVN, that argument has become less plausible. An alternative view, advanced by Mearsheimer (2014; p. 105), is that Hanoi agreed to leave the RVN in place because Northern officials thought that the fastest way to get the US to leave the country. At that point, North Vietnamese troops would be in a position to overthrow the RVN unobstructed, as they indeed would do less than two-and-a-half years later. Vietnam historian William Duiker argues that on balance... Hanoi had the better of the Paris deal, for the US withdrawal was not matched by a similar pullback [from South Vietnam] by the PAVN [Peoples' Army of Vietnam]. He

also indicates that the Communists held a stronger political position in the South than did the weakened RVN (Duiker, 1981; p. 297).

6. Vietnam and Credibility

Over and again, Kissinger has stressed the importance of maintaining credibility of US commitments. Indeed, maintaining credibility seemed sometimes to stand alone as a reason for persisting in policy, independent of geopolitical competition or fear of domestic upheavals in the unaligned regions of the world. After breaking his formal relationship with it in 1963, Kissinger argued that the Kennedy administration was undermining the US reputation for reliability - “the most important asset any nation has”. He wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, January 1969, “However we got into Vietnam, whatever the judgment of our actions, ending the war honorably is essential for the peace of the world. Any other solution may unloose forces that would complicate prospects of international order” (p. 843). Almost 40 years after leaving office, he summarized the view of the Nixon administration:

[President Nixon] thought it his responsibility [to end the war] in the context of America’s global commitments for sustaining the postwar international order... America could not jettison its security commitments in one part of the world without provoking challenges to its resolve in others. The preservation of American credibility in defense of its allies and the global system of order – a role the United States had performed for two decades - remained an integral part of Nixon’s calculations (Kissinger, 2014b; p. 300).¹⁴

This and similar arguments have come under sharp criticism in the political science literature. Jonathan Mercer (1996) studied several military crises to conclude that when a country backs down enemies do not make judgements about its “character”, but instead assume that such decisions are made in response to “situations”. Daryl Press (2005) examined pre-World War II “appeasement”, the Berlin crises and the Cuban missile crisis to determine how high-stakes security decisions are reached. He concluded that leaders make decisions based on their judgement about their opponents’ interests and relative power. Opponents’ “past actions” – the crux of the credibility argument – are much less important. Looking at the US experience in Vietnam, Press noted:

By fighting wars to preserve their country’s credibility, leaders are expending *power* – which really *does* affect credibility – to build reputation, which does not seem to affect credibility.... The American decision to fight the Vietnam War provides a clear example of leaders making this mistake. They believed that losing South Vietnam might reduce US credibility to defend NATO. Therefore they decided to defend South Vietnam in order to hedge against possible losses to America’s reputation. But in doing so, they seriously reduced American power. As a result of Vietnam, the US military was less prepared to defend core US interests from 1970 to 1980 than at virtually any other point in the Cold War (Press, 2005; p. 159).

Morgenthau (whom Press cites) earlier offered similar illustrations, noting for example that France’s reputation for power *rose* after if liquidated losing enterprises in Indochina in 1954 and Algeria in 1962. Similarly, he noted, America’s Bay of Pigs debacle of 1961 weighed little in the scales of US prestige. (Morgenthau, 1965; p. 11) Where Kissinger speaks of forces that might have been “unloosened” by withdrawal from Vietnam, we should also acknowledge countervailing damages, both inside the US and in the coin of international reputation, that resulted from not withdrawing. This might further be the case given widespread opposition to the war among US allies, especially in Europe.

In both the Berlin crisis of 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, Kissinger was frustrated that, in his view, Kennedy had backed down too easily. In the case

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

of Cuba, Kissinger's disappointment rested on US acquiescence in a continued Soviet military presence on the island; he did not then know of the Cuban-for-Turkish missiles swap, which would have dismayed him further. Kissinger's main focus at that time was Europe, and his concern - shared by the influential Dean Acheson, among others - was that the US nuclear guarantee for European security might collapse if the US were seen as unreliable (pp. 494-495). As he expressed it in the 1958 Wallace interview cited earlier:

If the Soviet Union attacks and in fact we are very much more afraid of total war than they are -- they will gradually blackmail the free world into surrender. Everything that I say is based on the assumption that we are as willing to run risks as the Soviet Union. If this is not the case, we are lost, and I think we ought to face that fact (p. 413).

To somewhat reduce the downside odds in making strategic choices, Kissinger contributed to the ongoing dialog about building capacity for "flexible response"; but flexible alternatives were unsatisfactory in Berlin, in part because Soviet conventional strength in central Europe exceeded NATO's. The nuclear guarantee – based on US readiness to go to either a limited or general nuclear war – raised nearly unanswerable questions about the willingness of the US to take action that might lead to millions of casualties. Uncertainty about the US commitment, in turn, fed French and German fears, which undermined the credibility of NATO, led to demands for a European nuclear force separate from NATO, and might offer diplomatic openings to the Soviets. It also raised the specter of a US-Soviet deal with the potential to subordinate the national security interests of western European nations.

Kennedy was ready to suffer a loss in US prestige, or to open some doubt about US reliability, if that was the cost of avoiding a nuclear exchange. Ferguson summarizes that Kennedy "simply had not been convinced that a limited war, or a conventional war, could be fought that would not rapidly escalate to an all-out nuclear war." So he looked for a way out (p. 513). Ferguson concludes that Kennedy acted as the realist while Kissinger was an idealist – and that Kennedy was right (p. 558).

This was a context for US decisions leading to the buildup in Vietnam. While instigating a conventional war over Berlin or Cuba would have been perilous in the extreme, the stakes in Vietnam during the 1960s were not going to be high enough to trigger a nuclear showdown. Paradoxically, the US then chose to fight a conventional war in what Ferguson describes as "a strategically inconsequential former French colony" (p. 577). Some US officials anticipated that evidence of commitment in Vietnam would ricochet to improve US credibility in Europe.

Kissinger, visiting Germany in a semi-official capacity in January 1967, suggested to a formally retired (but still engaged) Chancellor Konrad Adenauer that a US defeat in Vietnam would make it easier for East German leader Walter Ulbricht to put pressure on Berlin. As Kissinger reported back to Washington, the argument did not impress:

Adenauer looked at me and said, and do you think that I believe that you will protect us? I said, yes. He said, I no longer believe that you will protect us. Your actions over recent years have made clear that to you détente [with the Soviet Union] is more important than anything else (p. 716).

This exchange illustrates the logic of the political science criticisms cited earlier. Adenauer (and other Germans, across the political spectrum,) did not believe it was in the US interest to fight a nuclear war over Berlin, or even over Western Europe, and they would look for other means to advance their security. The US war in Vietnam amounted to an effort to roll back the clock, an effort to get NATO partners to take their places under a superpower-led order. What happened in

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Vietnam scarcely affected calculations of American power and interest – except to the extent the Germans considered the war a moral and political disaster, and a distraction from matters closer to their concern (pp. 712-713).

Evidence from France was similar. In a 1964 article, Kissinger described DeGaulle as “so certain of [America’s military commitment to Europe] that he does not consider [French] political independence a risk.” While no European country joined the US effort in Vietnam, DeGaulle in fact worked against stated US interests there – suggesting that Vietnam should be considered as within a Chinese sphere of influence. DeGaulle thought he could advance such a multi-polar view of power relations in Asia without undermining the US security commitment to Europe (pp. 704-705).

When Kissinger, as Nixon’s national security advisor, was summoned by DeGaulle after a dinner at the Elysee Palace in February 1969, he was greeted with the question “Why don’t you get out of Vietnam?”

“Because,” I replied, “a sudden withdrawal might give us a credibility problem.”

“Where?” the General wanted to know. I mentioned the Middle East.

“How very odd,” said the General from a foot above me. “It is precisely in the Middle East that I thought your enemies had the credibility problem” (Kissinger, 1979; p. 110).

Kissinger does not record an answer to DeGaulle at the time, nor do his memoirs indicate how he might have responded. Indeed, he seems to have treated the General’s query in the manner of an eccentric aside from a creative genius. But Kissinger’s subsequent account buttressed DeGaulle’s insight. Soviet reputation was damaged by military losses of its clients Egypt and Syria to the Israelis in 1967, and Moscow sought an opportunity to recoup. Kissinger advised Nixon less than a month after the conversation with DeGaulle:

In my opinion... we were more likely to obtain Soviet cooperation in Vietnam by moving deliberately [that is, very slowly] in the Middle East, where the Soviet clients were the weaker party, than by relieving its embarrassment through talks that would give the Soviets a dazzling opportunity to demonstrate their utility to their Arab friends (Kissinger, 1979; p. 352).

Kissinger’s analysis put a paradoxical light on the credibility matter. As DeGaulle had said, the Soviets lacked credibility in the Middle East. But because the US needed Soviet pressure against Hanoi, the US would have to take some measured action to *restore* Soviet credibility in the Mideast as a *quid pro quo*. Imagine a counterfactual in which the US had allowed its Saigon allies to be replaced, and then departed Vietnam. In that case, the US would not have been obliged to look for a favor from the Soviets in Southeast Asia, and hence would not have had to make concessions to them in the Middle East. Quite plausibly, therefore, US persistence in Vietnam could have *weakened* US credibility in the Middle East, just as it could have increased Soviet credibility.

In the event, US Middle East diplomacy in subsequent years advanced American interests. Soviet credibility did not recover, and Kissinger commented to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin in March of the same year that the Soviet government’s Mideast policy guaranteed its clients “only stalemate or military defeat” (Kissinger, 1979; p. 1252). Egyptian President Anwar Sadat would expel 15,000 Soviet advisors in July 1972. The Soviets had a number of reasons for holding back from endorsing its clients’ positions in 1972 – including concern about Israeli military strength, and their need for US support in ratification of new German treaties as well as for US grain. Kissinger, returning to the credibility issue, added:

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Our demonstration of firmness on India-Pakistan and on Vietnam (not to mention the conflicts [in Jordan] in the autumn of 1970) must have convinced the Soviets that one more crisis would overload the circuit (Kissinger, 1979; p. 1297).

All three of these conflicts imposed material and diplomatic burdens on the US. Kissinger's argument seems to be that burdening US diplomatic and material resources can have a second-order effect in strengthening US credibility. Did he mean that US credibility in the Middle East would have been less if the US had left Vietnam years earlier because there would then have been no need to demonstrate "firmness"? (This is the logic of what he told DeGaulle!) Surely, Sadat as well as the Soviets by 1972 were calculating US power and interests at stake in the Middle East, as the political science literature suggests – rather than reliving whatever decisions the US had taken years earlier in Southeast Asia.

Ferguson describes Antonin Snejdarek, director of a Czech research institute, as providing Kissinger with a "master class" in geopolitics induring the latter's visit in September 1966. Snejdarek detailed tensions within Communist bloc countries, and then argued that the US war in Vietnam "might be a convenient pretext [for Moscow] to tighten control over Eastern Europe". This was not a one-off insight, as Ferguson mentions that other Czech scholars were saying nearly the same thing (pp. 738, 740, 745-746). Ferguson narrates this discussion as part of Kissinger's education, part of the process by which he became more "realist", and more inclined to make diplomatic approaches to Moscow or Beijing. But it also depicts an odd bias in Kissinger's thought process: keeping US commitments was crucial for him, even if doing so strengthened the *Soviets'* geopolitical leverage.

Beyond "idealism," beyond his choice of policy maxims, Kissinger's willingness to consider alternative frameworks seems to have bumped up against a hard constraint: his preference for order, even one in which the purported geopolitical opponent's prerogatives were protected. Kissinger's built-in conservatism left him inclined to view events as a bi-polarist Cold Warrior; his conclusions were in line with Washington's predilections. It becomes clearer why DeGaulle and Adenauer concluded that US policies implicitly advanced a US-Soviet "condominium" at the expense of European interests. Not for Kissinger was a Kennedy-esque move to end the Cold War -or a Reagan-like move to win it.

7. Some Perspectives

Ferguson intends his book as an account of Kissinger's life and education through 1968, in the spirit of a *Bildungsroman* (p. 875). Historical verdicts on Kissinger will depend much more on what happened afterward. Part of Ferguson's story is that Kissinger overcame the rigidities of an early idealism, and came more to respect realists Bismarck, DeGaulle, and Morgenthau.¹⁵ But what stands out in gathering Kissinger's views on the American role in Vietnam is how consistent they have been, from a *Foreign Affairs* article in 1955 to memoranda in the early 1960s, through his time in the White House, his memoirs, and even to more recent writings.

Kissinger was more willing than the presidents he served to risk nuclear war over Berlin or Cuba. He was prepared to absorb tens of thousands of deaths to advance the greater good, and he felt driven by an idealist imperative to advocate such exchanges. He was ready to slog on with the RVN in Vietnam, despite credible intelligence estimates that South Vietnam was unlikely to prevail under any circumstances - again, for the greater strategic good, of maintaining US credibility. He subordinated concern about justice and human rights violations in the war in Vietnam to considerations of the broader US power position. While his views on some of these might have changed after 1968, all appear to have been part

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

of his mental toolkit at the time he became Nixon's national security advisor in January 1969 – and taken together they seem to overstate the strategic interest of the US in Vietnam, and are based on a view that subsumes most international politics into a bipolar US-Soviet competition by the 1960s. From the evidence Ferguson assembles, these reservations are not made only *ex-post*, but would have been reasonable in 1968. This reader reaches the unexpected conclusion that Kissinger did not become a realist soon enough.

The Nixon Administration's cardinal conceptual error in its Vietnam policy was to push aside what Kissinger should have understood by 1965 - that, given any plausible military scenario, Hanoi was not going to negotiate a settlement that would leave the RVN in power. Kissinger (2014b; pp. 301-302), decades later and somewhat backhandedly, acknowledged as much, noting that "contrary to conventional wisdom, the Nixon Administration *overestimated the scope for negotiation* (italics added). For the battle-hardened leadership in Hanoi... compromise was the same as defeat."

We know that the Soviet Union lost the Cold War, and that the US and the Soviets never traded nuclear attacks. Kissinger emphasized moral factors, and "ideals," as decisive in the superpower competition (p. 25), and there is evidence that Soviet leadership and society were demoralized by the 1980s. Material factors also played a large role. Kissinger over-estimated Soviet economic power, as did many. The US won the competition because it and similarly situated countries had by far the more robust economic system, while the economic ascendance of East Asia left the Soviet Union looking passed-by. Soviet disintegration was accelerated by the collapse of oil prices in the middle-1980s, another material factor. Closer to security and diplomatic considerations, the US became quite effective at containment - in gathering and leading a coalition of dozens of countries – with the important, but limited, objective of blocking Soviet expansion in either Europe or Asia. Containment turned out to be robust enough to survive any loss of credibility resulting from concessions over Berlin and Cuba. Indeed, the threat of nuclear war over either was never really tenable, so backing away from it was an act of diplomatic realism that over time perhaps strengthened containment, not weakened it.

Another argument holds that a US withdrawal from Vietnam would have led the Soviets to encourage more wars of national liberation (Turner, 2010; pp. 105-106). This argument is unconvincing, for two reasons. First, given the extraordinary strain the Vietnam War brought to the US, the Soviets might have seen it in their interest to encourage more such wars - *especially* if they believed the US was committed to fighting them. Second, the Soviets *did* subsequently encourage wars of national liberation - or, wars of communist opposition - in Afghanistan, Central America, and southern Africa. On the ledger of Cold War gains and losses, the outcomes of most of these went against the Soviets. Containment-after-Vietnam succeeded without large commitments of ground troops.

What about Southeast Asia? Much of Asia has prospered since the last US helicopters left South Vietnam in 1975, and the region has avoided major war. Notwithstanding defeat of South Vietnam, did the prolonged US effort there contribute to laying a basis for political stability and long-term growth in the region? The *Economist* (1978) ran a lead editorial, "The Bottle Stayed Corked," arguing just that. Mark Moyar (2006; pp. 375ff) writes openly of the "domino effect," and quotes a variety of senior politicians or military leaders in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Philippines and India who said the US role in Vietnam was critical to stabilizing their own nations. According to Moyar, the Indonesian Army, encouraged by the US commitment in Vietnam, resisted President Sukarno, who by 1965 was making peace with Indonesia's communist

party and collaborating with Chinese and Vietnamese communists. Moyar notes (with no hint of regret) that factions of the Indonesian Army led an effort that killed several hundred thousand communist party members in 1965 and resulted in their country becoming a “reliable friend” of the US. Kissinger himself records that Lee Kwan Yew –

the founder of the Singapore state and perhaps the wisest Asian leader of his period, was vocal in his firm belief, maintained to this writing [in 2014] that American intervention was indispensable to preserve the possibility of an independent Southeast Asia (Kissinger, 2014b; p. 297).

The essence of these claims is that the US presence in South Vietnam “bought time”. The premise is that international communism had momentum in the early- and middle-1960s that would be lost by the early 1970s, a consequence of Sino-Soviet split, the weakening of China as a result of the Cultural Revolution, Nixon’s détente with Soviet Union and diplomatic opening to China, and an improving economic outlook elsewhere in Asia. To be clear, this argument - Moyar’s, Kissinger’s, Yew’s -- can be made even though the US eventually lost in Vietnam, and it could be made even if it was understood all along that the US was likely to lose. The argument is precarious, but not necessarily wrong. It has been a persistent claim in favor of the Johnson and the Nixon-Kissinger policies in Vietnam.

But there is contrary evidence. Ambassador Galbraith wrote later of attending a meeting in Washington on November 6, 1961, with Kennedy and Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in which the latter displayed indifference about UN or ICC¹⁶ involvement in Vietnam. Notwithstanding Moyar’s (2006; p. 382) inclusion of India in his list of countries where stability was enhanced by US intervention in Vietnam, Nehru repeated emphatically to Kennedy that the US should commit no military forces to that country (Galbraith, 1969; p. 214). This meeting took place in Washington at the height of internal contention following the Taylor mission about whether to commit US forces. Louis Joxe, the French minister who attended Nehru’s funeral in 1964, commented to DeGaulle afterward that Indians felt threatened, even “terrorized” by US initiatives that might worsen relations with China. He also noted American and British hostility to France, and added that Indian leadership would welcome a more assertive French diplomatic role in Asia (Peyrefitte, 1997; p. 496).

Indonesian President Sukarno, who hosted the 1955 Bandung Conference of nonaligned nations, visited Kennedy in Washington in 1961; in a warm atmosphere, Kennedy indicated eagerness to improve relations and his government increased foreign assistance (Douglas, 2010; pp. 259-260). But after Johnson succeeded Kennedy, two US policy decisions worsened US-Indonesian relations. First, Johnson (under pressure from Congressional hardliners) refused in January 1964 to sign a determination that economic aid to Indonesia was in the US national interest; Kennedy would have made such a determination almost routinely. Economic aid was then cancelled, although assistance to the Indonesian Army continued. Second, in June 1964 Johnson announced that the US would side with Malaysia in an on-going struggle between that country and Indonesia – all without consulting his own embassy in Jakarta (Jones, 1971; pp. 299, 342-343).¹⁷ In part as a consequence of the change in US policies, Sukarno turned for domestic support to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and for external support to communist China (Jones, 1971; p. 405). Both of these moves brought counter activity, by a faction of the Army against the PKI, and by US-led covert action to replace Sukarno (Douglas, 2008; pp. 375-377). In his subsequent account, Howard P. Jones, US Ambassador to Indonesia during 1958-1965, discusses Sukarno’s rule, the Army’s resistance, and the purge of the communists - while not identifying any US role in Vietnam as a factor influencing these events (Jones, 1971; *passim*).

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Indeed, for Jones an important consequence of the Vietnam intervention ran in the opposite direction - it brought communists in Hanoi and Beijing closer together (Jones, 1971: p. 338). Opposition to neutralism in Indonesia and elsewhere reflected an often implicit, but essential, argument among those advocating continued US presence in Vietnam.

Nixon, in 1967, as a then unannounced candidate for president, split the difference on the role of the US intervention in Vietnam as a stabilizing force. He sided to some extent with the war hawks, as he wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that the “[US] commitment in Vietnam” was “a vital factor in the turnaround in Indonesia.” But his endorsement was restrained: he went on to emphasize growing economic success in a very large swath of Asian countries and, without saying it explicitly, but as Ferguson interprets it, concluded that “ultimate American failure in Vietnam really did not matter that much” – capitalism was winning in Asia (pp. 802-803).

Ferguson promises to consider in his second volume whether Kissinger’s concern over credibility was merited. (p. 842n) Here is an interim judgment. As Mercer (1996) and Press (2005) argue, major powers faced with security decisions will examine where an opponent’s national interests lie, and what its potential power resources will be. When the US drew back from war over Berlin or Cuba, it did not seriously weaken its power position, but, as Kissinger would argue, it *did* create uncertainty about the structure of defense in Europe and elsewhere (p. 510). That was not on balance a change for the worse, as defense structures have since moved in a direction they were going to have to move in any event. An obvious consequence was that regional powers challenged US leadership on security issues after the Cuban crisis, somewhat attenuating the bipolarist framework. For example, DeGaulle and Adenauer negotiated a treaty of mutual friendship in January 1963. Kissinger remarks in *Diplomacy* that;

Vietnam [as it appeared to Nixon and Kissinger in 1969] *finally signaled that it was high time to reassess America’s role in the developing world, and to find some sustainable ground between abdication and overextension* (Kissinger, 1994: p. 704). (italics added)

This choice of phrase must mean that Kissinger came subsequently to believe the US commitment in Vietnam reflected strategic misjudgment - not simply that an advantageous intervention was operationally or tactically mis-managed. Perhaps, as in the case of Berlin and Cuba, US diplomacy should have dealt with challenges to US leadership that would result from disengagement in Vietnam - rather than doubling down on the earlier mistake.

It is hard to accept undiluted Morgenthau’s premise that there was no spillover from one country to the next, or that there was no momentum in the attraction of communism during the 1950s and 1960s, even if communist movements were not centrally directed. We cannot conclude that changing strategic direction has no costs; the question is whether a new direction is likely to be wise on balance on its own merits. The parallel between concessions during potential nuclear crises and concessions regarding the Vietnam commitment is closer than we might expect. It was abundantly clear long before Nixon and Kissinger acceded to power in 1969 that the US was not again going to intervene with hundreds of thousands of troops in another divided-country war.¹⁸ That was going to be true no matter what measures the Nixon administration would undertake to prevail in Vietnam. The US would nevertheless find a way to continue its diplomatic and military leadership – without the implicit promise of large or extended American troop deployments (Duiker, 1994; pp. 379-383).

Ferguson’s biography is often depicted as sympathetic to Kissinger. Maybe so, but on the not-so-narrow topic of stewardship of Vietnam diplomacy, the detail Ferguson provides suggests that, as of January 1969, Kissinger misunderstood what

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

terms of a settlement would have to look like, and exaggerated the reputational consequences of altering the US commitment. If anything, these failures followed from too much embrace of abstractions – the obligation to defend freedom, the obligations to honor commitments, a constrained mental framework of geopolitical competition. These mistakes were not based on “realism;” abstractions are a species of ideals. Writing forty years after the fact, Kissinger left the door slightly open to the possibility that he had assigned too much priority to maintaining the US commitment in Vietnam:

...whether another definition could have been given to American credibility [in the context of US Vietnam policy] will remain the subject of heated debate (Kissinger, 2014b; p. 301).¹⁹

Ferguson more than once concludes that Morgenthau’s consistently realist understanding of options involving Vietnam was superior to Kissinger’s (pp. 823, 839, 873). Ferguson suggests that his sequel will show a seasoned Kissinger in a more realist light, in part a result of having learned from the Vietnam ordeal. But regarding Vietnam diplomacy-- it is hard to imagine a Castlereagh or a Bismarck as so slow to recognize power dynamics that had been clear to others for years, and dragging his country through such a morass for so long. Nor is it likely that either would have embraced such policy in the first place.

Notes

- ¹ Parenthetical page numbers in text reference Ferguson (2015).
- ² Ferguson notes that (Dickson, 1978) also reviewed Kissinger's philosophical interests.
- ³ On Kantian ethics generally, see (Wolff, 1973).
- ⁴ In an odd mistake, Ferguson describes Morgenthau as "nearly ten years older" than Kissinger. (p. 17) In fact, their birthdates were nineteen years apart --1904 and 1923 -- and some of Morgenthau's most important work, including *Politics Among Nations* (1948), appeared before or while Kissinger was an undergraduate.
- ⁵ Also, (FRUS, 1996) on Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence; and (Dallek, 2003) on Cuba.
- ⁶ James K. Galbraith, author of Galbraith (2003), is John Kenneth Galbraith's son.
- ⁷ Also, (Parker, 2005; pp. 364-377) regarding John Kenneth Galbraith.
- ⁸ Logevall (1992) cites the *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. II, pp. 193-194.
- ⁹ Logevall (1992) cites *NY Times*, January 30 and 31, 1964.
- ¹⁰ Kissinger's (2003) account was originally included in (Kissinger, 1994) – which predates some of the studies cited here. To my knowledge, Kissinger offers no revision in more recent writings, including in (Kissinger, 2014b).
- ¹¹ EXCOMM members are listed in [Retrieved from].
- ¹² Kissinger's and Nixon's 1972 memoranda are quoted in (Woodward, 2015; Ch. 20).
- ¹³ For a counter-argument, see (Isaacs, 2015).
- ¹⁴ Kissinger temporizes somewhat on whether his view in 1969 remains his view forty-some years later; see final section, below.
- ¹⁵ Lacouture (1986; p. 252) described DeGaulle as an "implacable interprete de l'histoire" – a good one sentence description of a realist mindset.
- ¹⁶ The International Control Commission (ICC) was established in 1954 to oversee implementation of the Geneva Accords.
- ¹⁷ Ambassador Howard Palfrey Jones, author of Jones (1971), is not to be confused with Howard Jones, author of Jones (2003), cited earlier.
- ¹⁸ During 1973-1975, the US Congress would not approve war materiel for the RVN. While US allies surely understood that the US would be unlikely to commit troops elsewhere on anything approaching the scale it had in Vietnam, the decision not to provide materiel was a different matter – and is harder to defend.
- ¹⁹ What matters from a realist perspective are the *consequences* of adjusting or abandoning commitments. Treating the question as one of the "'definition' of credibility" recalls Kissinger's earlier idealist, Kant-inspired language about the process of selecting from among "maxims". We should not over-interpret from the one sentence the topic gets in Kissinger (2014b) – but Kissinger's choice of words suggests the persistence of the earlier thought framework.

References

- Caro, R. (2012). *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: the Passage of Power*. New York: Knopf Doubleday.
- Dallek, R. (2003). *JFK: An Unfinished Life*. New York: Little, Brown.
- Dickson, P. (1978). *Kissinger and the Meaning of History*. Cambridge University Press.
- Douglas, J. (2010). *JFK and the Unspeakable*. New York: Simon & Schuster/uker.
- Duiker, W. (1981). *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*. Boulder CO: Westview.
- Duiker, W. (1994). *US Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Economist, (1978). The Bottle Stayed Corked, March 13.
- Elliott, D. (2003). *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975*. Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Ferguson, N. (2015). *Kissinger 1923-1968: The Idealist I*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Frei, C. (2001). *Hans J. Morgenthau: an Intellectual Biography*. Baton Rouge LA: Louisiana State.
- FRUS, (1988). *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume I, Vietnam, 1961*; "Draft Memorandum for the President," November 8, 1961.
- FRUS, (1996). *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Vol. VI, Kennedy-Khrushchev Exchanges*.
- Galbraith, J.K. (2003). Exit Strategy: in 1963, JFK ordered a complete withdrawal from Vietnam, *Boston Review*, September 1. [Retrieved from].
- Galbraith, J.K. (1969). *Ambassador's Journal*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin.
- Galbraith, J.K. (1982). *A Life in Our Times*. New York: Random House.
- Isaacs, A. (2015). "Setting the Record Straight on the End of the Vietnam War (3): Not a Lost Victory," *Foreign Policy*, 16 April. [Retrieved from].
- Jones, H. (2003). *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, H.P. (1971). *Indonesia: the Impossible Dream*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Kaplan, F. (2012). "What Robert Caro Got Wrong," *Slate*, May 31. [Retrieved from].
- Kennedy, C. et al. (2011). *Jacqueline Kennedy: Historic Conversations on Life with John F. Kennedy. Interviews with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.* New York: Hyperion.
- Kissinger, H. (1950). *The Meaning of History*. Harvard University Undergraduate Thesis.
- Kissinger, H. (1965). *Troubled Partnership*. Council on Foreign Relations.
- Kissinger, H. (1979). *White House Years*. Little Brown.
- Kissinger, H. (1994). *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Kissinger, H. (2003). *Ending the Vietnam War: a History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Kissinger, H. (2011). "Otto von Bismarck: Master Statesman," *NY Times*, March 11. [Retrieved from].
- Kissinger, H. (2014a). Part II of Interview; *Der Spiegel*, Nov. 13. [Retrieved from].
- Kissinger, H. (2014b). *World Order*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Kojeve, A. (1969). *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, translation by James H. Nichols, Jr. Ithaca NY: Basic Books.
- Lacouture, J. (1986). *DeGaulle III. Le Souverain*. Paris: Seuil.
- Logevall, F. (1992). "DeGaulle, Neutralization, and American Involvement in Vietnam, 1963-1964." *Pacific Historical Review*, 61(1), 69-102. doi. 10.2307/3640789
- Logevall, F. (1999). *Choosing War: The Last Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Logevall, F. (2013). *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*. New York: Random House.
- Mahoney, R. (1983). *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mearsheimer, J. (2014). *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton.
- Mercer, J. (1996). *Reputation and International Politics*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University.
- Morgenthau, H. (1936). *Positivisme Mal Compris et Theorie Realist de Droit International*. Madrid.
- Morgenthau, H. (1965). *Vietnam and the United States*. Washington: Public Affairs.
- Morgenthau, H. (1969a). *New York Review of Books*, October 23. [Retrieved from].
- Morgenthau, H. (1969b). *A New Foreign Policy for the United States*. New York: Praeger.
- Moyar, M. (2006). *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Newman, J. (1992). *JFK and Vietnam: Deception Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power*. New York: Time Warner.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

- Parker, R. (2005). *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics*. New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux.
- Peyrefitte, A. (1997). *C'était de Gaulle : La France reprend sa place dans le monde*. Paris: Fayard.
- Press, D. (2005). *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University.
- Reeves, R. (1993). *President Kennedy: Profile of Power*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Sorley, L. (1999). *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*. New York: Harcourt.
- Talbot, D. (2015). *The Devil's Chessboard: Allen Dulles, the CIA, and the Rise of America's Secret Government*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Turner, R. (2010). "Triumph Forsaken: a Path to Setting the Record Straight," in Wiest, A. & Doidge, M., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*. New York: Routledge.
- Wolff, R. (1973). *The Autonomy of Reason: A Commentary on Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Woodward, B. (2015). *The Last of the President's Men*. New York: Simon and Schuster.



Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>).

