NIXON AS MADMAN

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In a famous conversation during his 1968 campaign for the presidency, Richard Nixon confided to H.R. Haldeman, “I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I’ve reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war” (p. 76). The Madman Theory provides the narrative thread for Jeffrey Kimball’s significant new book on Nixon’s search for “peace with honor” in Vietnam war. Drawing extensively on archival collections, including recently declassified National Security Council documents, and on interviews with North Vietnamese participants, Kimball provides convincing interpretation and fresh detail to describe the tortured path of the belligerents to the Paris Accords. The Nixon who emerges from Kimball’s account, Nixon as Madman, is something less than the diplomatic genius of revisionist legend or his own mythology.

Kimball uses the Madman Theory to explain Nixon in two ways. First, Nixon encouraged belief in his capacity for madness as a way to instill fear in his adversaries and bend them to his will. Nixon had learned the art of the threat as vice president under Eisenhower, whose New Look defense policy relied on the retaliatory power of nuclear weapons to contain communism. Soon after entering office in 1953, Eisenhower warned the Chinese that unless they agreed to end the Korean war, he would launch a nuclear attack. When the Chinese settled, Eisenhower erroneously credited their compliance to his use of atomic blackmail. As president himself, Nixon concluded that mad threats, especially if issued by a leader perceived as unstable and unpredictable, might coerce the North Vietnamese to settle another war on U.S. terms.

Kimball also uses madness as a metaphor for describing Nixon’s psychology. Nixon, he suggests, suffered from a personality disorder that predisposed him to the diplomacy of threat. “Nixon’s behavior,” writes Kimball, “may have exhibited features that were paranoid, antisocial, narcissistic, [and] passive aggressive” (p. 12). Time and again, an insecure president who feared the appearance of weakness would shift from depression to manic activity, from paralyzing uncertainty to spasms of violent rage. These rages,
Nixon believed, rages born of both policy and temperament, could stave off defeat in Vietnam. If ever a belief proved to be delusional, it was this one.

Kimball persuasively demonstrates that Nixon sought much more than a decent interval between American withdrawal and the inevitable defeat of the Saigon regime. Nixon wanted victory, defined as the preservation of a viable, noncommunist state in South Vietnam. The point of victory was to defend American credibility, an essential prerequisite, Nixon believed, for maintaining America’s global predominance. But how could Nixon win a war that Lyndon Johnson could not win and win it after he himself, during the 1968 campaign, had discussed the gradual phase-out of U.S. troops? In truth, the enemy held better cards than he did, but the sometime poker player in the White House would not believe it. The war would be over within a year, Nixon told his cabinet early in 1969. It might take six months, Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser, informed a group of visitors.

Kimball documents how Nixon intended to beat the odds in Vietnam by combining creative diplomacy with military force. Early in 1969, the president’s chief diplomatic tactic was linkage. Assuming that the Soviets could deliver their Vietnamese client, Nixon proposed linking an agreement ending the war to fruitful discussions with the Soviets on arms control, the Middle East, and Berlin. In April Kissinger informed the Soviet ambassador that the president was prepared to send Cyrus Vance to Moscow to negotiate the outlines of peace with a North Vietnamese representative. Contingent on progress in these talks, Vance would also be authorized to negotiate other outstanding issues with the Soviets. If the Vance mission failed, Kissinger hinted, a mad blow against the North would follow. The Soviets rejected linkage, the North Vietnamese refused to come to Moscow, and the threat of force went unheeded.

Meanwhile, Nixon had begun to cultivate his image as the mad bomber. Nixon believed that the outcome of peace talks hinged on the military balance. So did the North Vietnamese. In February 1969 the communists launched the first in a series of military offensives designed to hasten the American retreat and to position the National Liberation Front for the unification struggle that would follow. On March 17, 1969, after delays and hesitations, Nixon responded to the offensive not by resuming the bombing of North Vietnam, which Johnson had halted entirely the previous November, but by secretly dispatching B-52s to bomb North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia, a long-standing objective of the American military. Kimball contends that damage to the sanctuaries was less Nixon’s goal than the message he was sending Hanoi: He had terrifying weapons at his disposal, and he would use them indiscriminately to achieve a “negotiated victory” (p. 137). Hanoi did not so much as flinch.
In May 1969, at peace talks in Paris, the two sides tabled their proposals for a settlement. The North demanded unilateral withdrawal of American forces from the South and a coalition government that excluded members of the current Saigon regime. These terms were tantamount to a communist victory. The United States wanted mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam and survival of the current Saigon regime. These terms were tantamount to a communist defeat. Despite stalemate in the negotiations, Nixon announced in June the first American troop withdrawals—25,000 to commence in July. Further withdrawals were supposed to depend on the success of Vietnamization, his program to turn the ground war over to the South Vietnamese. In fact, for reasons of domestic politics, Nixon would have to proceed with troop withdrawals whatever the state of hostilities in the South. Since the North had now only to wait it out, why should it settle?

There remained to Nixon the threat of the savage blow. On August 4, 1969, in Paris for his first secret meeting with emissaries from North Vietnam, Kissinger delivered a message from Nixon. If the North commenced serious negotiations looking to end the war, Nixon would scale back U.S. military operations. However, “if by November 1, no major progress had been made toward a solution, we will be compelled—with great reluctance—to take measures of the greatest consequence” (p. 157). Hanoi did not reply. At the Pentagon, contingency planning for a mad blow called Duck Hook intensified. Pressing to escalate, Kissinger told his staff in September: “I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point” (p. 163). Duck Hook, described here more fully than in any previous account, was to commence with a four-day attack on North Vietnam, featuring the mining of ports and the bombing of twenty-nine targets of military and economic significance. If the North still declined to make diplomatic concessions, additional four-day attacks would follow until the enemy broke. Contingency plans for these attacks included bombing the Red River dikes, an invasion of North Vietnam, and perhaps even nuclear options. But early in October, as the deadline approached, it was the Madman who broke. With polls showing declining domestic support for the war and with a massive antiewar demonstration—the Vietnam Moratorium—looming at mid-month, Nixon called off Duck Hook. A year after he took office, Nixon found himself mired in the same quagmire that had swallowed Lyndon Johnson.

As 1970 began, Nixon could only prepare for a protracted struggle and hope that Vietnamization would work. But on March 18, right-wing military officers overthrew the neutralist prime minister of Cambodia, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, creating a new situation. Like others who have examined the Cambodian episode, Kimball cannot prove American complicity in this coup
but considers it likely. Fighting quickly broke out between troops of the new Cambodian government and North Vietnamese troops based in the country. As it did, Nixon shifted into manic activity, becoming in Kissinger’s words, “overwrought,” “irritable,” and “defiant” (p. 204). Nixon fed his renewed appetite for war with repeated viewing of the film Patton, and he indulged in towering rages against the timidity of his bureaucracy. During the third week of April, Nixon decided to invade Cambodia with American troops in a bold effort to turn the tide of the war. Once again, in Kimball’s view, personality disorder and policy imperatives conjoined to produce a spasm of violence. The invasion of Cambodia, which began on April 29, was intended to wipe out North Vietnamese sanctuaries, capture the enemy’s central headquarters, rescue the new regime in Phnom Penh, and protect Vietnamization. The invasion would also remind Hanoi that the Madman in the White House retained the capacity to launch a savage blow. But Nixon lost his nerve again. Stunned by the extent and passion of campus protests, especially after National Guardsmen killed four students at Kent State University, he pledged on May 8 to pull out all U.S. troops from Cambodia by June 30. The aborted invasion ended indecisively, and Nixon limped through the rest of 1970 still looking for an honorable exit.

By 1971, time was running out, and Nixon knew it. American troops in South Vietnam, numbering 543,000 in April 1969, would fall to 218,000 at the end of 1971 and would be nearly gone by the end of 1972. As American power evaporated, the other side would have ever less reason to end the war short of victory. In the event that negotiations failed to extricate him, Nixon considered force-feeding South Vietnam with military equipment and then exiting as the Madman, massively bombing the North and mining its harbors. But in the spring of 1971, prospects for a negotiated settlement improved. For one thing, Nixon was moving at a rapid pace toward detente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the people’s Republic of China, either or both of whom might yet lean on North Vietnam to settle. For another, the U.S. offered a concession in Paris that finally abandoned the goal of victory. Meeting with North Vietnamese representatives in May 1971, Kissinger dropped the demand of mutual withdrawal, implicitly conceding that after American troops left South Vietnam, troops from the North could remain. To get out, the U.S. was now prepared to negotiate the partition of its ally.

But on one key communist demand, Nixon and Kissinger would not yield. They would not oust Thieu on their way out of Vietnam. In July 1971 the chief negotiator for the North offered a way around this obstacle in an interview in the New York Times. “The forthcoming election in South Vietnam is an opportunity for Mr. Nixon to change Thieu” (p. 270), said Le Duc Tho, referring to a presidential election scheduled for October. Instead, U.S.
officials in Saigon, countenancing a campaign of bribery and intimidation, helped derail an electable candidate acceptable to Hanoi and assure Thieu’s victory. By the closing months of 1971 the crucial issues in the peace talks all boiled down to one—whether or not Thieu, safely returned to office, would have a fighting chance to survive after the Americans left. In November 1971, following Kissinger’s second visit to Beijing, Mao himself suggested to the premier of North Vietnam that he allow Thieu to remain in power in the South, just as he, Mao, had permitted Chiang to stay in power in Taiwan. Pham Van Dong replied defiantly that in contrast to the Chinese, the Vietnamese had the strength to “sweep all these dogs out of Vietnam” (p. 284). Negotiations having reached an impasse, each side prepared for the climactic test of arms.

Anticipating a major North Vietnamese offensive in the spring of 1972, the aggressive Nixon dispatched ships and bombers to the theater of war, even as the passive Nixon continued his program of withdrawing troops from it. On March 30, North Vietnam forsook guerrilla warfare for an all-out conventional cross-border invasion against the South. The goals of the invaders were flexible. They might finally defeat the South and win the war, or they might strengthen their position prior to a diplomatic settlement with the Americans. Nixon saw the invasion as another chance to play the Madman. Creighton Abrams, Nixon’s military commander in Saigon, argued against diverting American bombers from defense of the South and doubted the efficacy of bombing the North. On May 8, 1972, Nixon unleashed Linebacker, a massive air campaign against North Vietnam. Johnson lacked the will to do it, Nixon boasted. I “have the will in spades” (p. 315). Nixon, concludes Kimball, was less interested in the effects of Linebacker on the invasion in South than in frightening North Vietnam, “influencing the negotiations, and diminishing Hanoi’s future war-fighting capability in the struggle that lay ahead for the South Vietnamese” (p. 316).

By mid-summer 1972, Hanoi was ready to talk. Though its forces had increased the territory under communist control, American air power had blunted the offensive. Moscow and Beijing preferred a negotiated solution to more war. Nixon was likely to offer better terms before the approaching presidential election than after. And it made sense to get the U.S. out now and stop the bombing rather than to let the war drag on. In May 1971, the United States had made its great concession by accepting the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the South after the U.S. withdrew. On August 1, 1972, North Vietnam made its great concession by dropping the demand for the ouster of Thieu. In a French villa outside Paris on October 8, 1972, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were at last ready to conclude peace. Initially there would be two governments in postwar South Vietnam—a communist government in
areas under communist control and the Thieu government for areas under Saigon’s control. A tripartite body called the National Council of Reconciliation and Concord (including representatives of both the National Liberation Front and the Saigon regime) would oversee elections to unify the South, a gesture to the defunct communist demand for a coalition government. The U.S. would quit Vietnam and get back its prisoners. Each side could resupply its forces in the South by replacing worn-out weapons on the basis of one-for-one. The cease-fire would begin October 30.

For reasons of politics, Nixon would rather have settled the war after the November election than before, but he was willing to abide by Kissinger’s timetable, so long as Thieu was willing too. As Kissinger discovered on a visit to Saigon on October 19, 1972, Thieu regarded Kissinger’s peace agreement as a betrayal. Thieu’s intransigence wrecked Kissinger’s timetable and forced him to renege on his deal with Hanoi. In November Kissinger had to return to Paris and resume negotiations with Le Duc Tho. The North refused to compromise the substance of the October agreement but did accept some of the modifications sought by Kissinger to appease Thieu. Only a few minor issues were still on the table when the Le Duc Tho recessed negotiations on December 13 to consult with his government in Hanoi.

Kissinger nonetheless regarded the behavior of the North Vietnamese at the talks as “insolent” (p. 360), and Nixon falsely charged them with breaking off the negotiations. Here was an opportunity to apply the Madman Theory one last time. Bombing the North would force additional concessions, signal Thieu that the U.S. was a reliable ally, and fulfill Nixon’s promise to himself that he would not exit Vietnam whimpering. “Russia and China might think they were dealing with a madman,” he mused, “and so had better force North Vietnam into a settlement before the world was consumed by a larger war” (p. 364). By the time he ended eleven days of merciless bombing on December 28, Nixon had battered North Vietnamese military targets at a staggering cost of 15 B-52s and 121 crewman. After the Paris talks resumed in January 1973, it took only a few days to reach agreement on the remaining issues, none of them crucial or worth all those bombs. Nixon, meantime, had brought Thieu into line by secretly promising to retaliate against the North if it violated the peace agreement and by threatening to sign alone if Thieu continued to balk. A week after Nixon’s second inauguration and four years after he thought he could end it within a year, the American war in Vietnam was finally over.

Kimball’s book is an important contribution to the literature on both the war and a pivotal presidency. But it is hardly the whole story. Actually, there were two Vietnam wars during the Nixon years. The first was the war that Nixon fought against North to save honor before his domestic opponents forced an American withdrawal. The second was the war that General
Creighton Abrams fought against the communists in South Vietnam. Exploiting the weakness of the Vietcong after the 1968 Tet offensive and abandoning General William Westmoreland’s disastrous strategy of search and destroy, Abrams emphasized pacification, regarded Vietnamization less as an inconvenience than a necessity, and employed a strategy of clear-and-hold to help Saigon regain control of most of the countryside. In his recent book on these developments, A Better War (1999), which appeared after Kimball’s study, Lewis Sorley concludes by quoting the judgment of Sir Robert Thompson a quarter of a century ago. “In my view,” said Thompson, “on December 30, 1972, after eleven days of those B-52 attacks on the Hanoi area, you had won the war. It was over” (Sorley, p. 356). Thompson—and Sorley—stretch a point. The United States did succeed during 1972 in demonstrating the ability of air power to prolong the war indefinitely. But the United States had neither defeated the North nor broken its will. It had taken the Vietnamese a thousand years to drive out a Chinese empire. However much time it took, the Vietnamese would defeat the American empire too. Time, as Kimball makes clear, was one thing Richard Nixon did not have.

However incomplete, Kimball’s achievement is considerable. Beside correcting the distorted versions of their war in the memoirs of Nixon and Kissinger, he has unearthed new information and offers authoritative accounts of events long mired in controversy. Moreover, his portrait of Nixon at war is as convincing as it is devastating. Unstable, uncertain, enamored of force, Nixon never understood the tenacity of the other side, its capacity to withstand punishment, its superior will in a struggle where it had the greater stake. Nixon tried linkage, Vietnamization, pacification, and triangular diplomacy to achieve victory, but none of them alone, or all of them together, could get him where he wanted to go. When he bet on the Madman Theory to win the game, the other side either called his bluff or shrugged off his fury. In the end, for all his threats and bluster, Nixon accomplished only a false truce that lasted less than two years.

Unfortunately, because Kimball is not much interested in story-telling, his book drains the history of these tremendous events of their inherent drama. Though narrative in form, his book too frequently loses its narrative line and bogs down in a welter of detail, especially in the tangled discussion of peace negotiations during the last year of the war. Few teachers of courses in twentieth-century history are likely to assign Nixon’s War. But because it is an indispensable book on a significant subject, they will read it themselves with profit.