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# Exchange on the Nixon Administration and the Vietnam War

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# Exchange on the Nixon Administration and the Vietnam War

## To the Editor:

I am grateful for the generally favorable review given my book *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) in the Winter 2007 issue of the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. Unfortunately, the reviewer, James J. Wirtz, grossly misrepresented the nature of the book and my theses, while also failing to place these theses in historiographic context.

Wirtz asserts, for example, that “Kimball seems most interested in using the documentary evidence to demonstrate that [President Richard] Nixon was in fact ‘mad’ in seeking to create the impression that he was becoming increasingly irrational.” To the contrary, I do not claim that either Nixon or Henry Kissinger was necessarily mad or certifiably crazy in pursuing “mad-man theory” stratagems. I do demonstrate, however, that they were naive and unsuccessful in using this stratagem.

The reviewer implies that I claim that Nixon and Kissinger “realized that Chinese and Soviet officials were willing to fight in Vietnam to the last North Vietnamese soldier.” Nixon and Kissinger thought no such thing. Indeed, their “triangular” and “linkage” diplomacy was based on quite different assumptions.

Wirtz claims that “Nixon and Kissinger were masterful practitioners of realpolitik” and that “Kissinger also emerges as a consummate diplomat,” thus implying that I drew these conclusions or that the documentary evidence I present in the book supported them. Instead, I argue that all parties—including Vietnamese, Soviet, and Chinese—engaged in realpolitik, but that of all the players Nixon and Kissinger were the least successful. Concerning Kissinger’s diplomatic skills, he was tactically very clever and a good debater, but he was also, as Nixon himself often commented, a poor negotiator.

Wirtz refers to the documentary excerpts in the book as “fragments.” In fact, most of the documents are substantial excerpts, and some are whole documents—all properly referenced to the originals. The book, as I explain in the preface, is not intended to be a comprehensive compendium or, in the re-

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viewer's words, a "sustained narrative." It is intended to provide substantial examples accompanied by ample analyses of recently declassified documentary evidence bearing on key historiographic issues concerning Nixon's and Kissinger's direction of the Vietnam War. For a "sustained narrative," Wirtz should have consulted my earlier book, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

Wirtz also omitted mention of other key issues and topics I document and analyze in *The Vietnam War Files*; for example, the progress of the secret negotiations, the so-called Nixon Doctrine, the decent-interval exit strategy, and the false and mythical narrative Nixon and Kissinger concocted after the war to defend their failed policies.

I fail to see how historical research can advance if reviewers do not accurately describe the books they are reviewing.

—Jeffrey P. Kimball,  
Professor Emeritus,  
Miami University (Ohio)

## **Reply from James J. Wirtz**

Jeffrey Kimball's fundamental complaint about my review is that it offered an inaccurate depiction of his book. This is surprising because the way he characterizes his manuscript generally corresponds to my description of *The Vietnam War Files*. In my review, I wrote that the book contained "excerpts of selected documents" and "fragments of documents," whereas Kimball says the book contains "substantial excerpts" of documents. I also informed readers that the book lacked a sustained narrative. Kimball concurs and suggests I consult another of his works if I seek this type of monograph. Kimball states an important purpose behind his volume was to demonstrate that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were "naïve and unsuccessful" in using the "mad man" strategy to extract the United States from Vietnam, whereas I stated that his analysis provided a "less than glowing depiction of the Nixon administration's efforts to extract the United States from its disastrous military involvement in Southeast Asia." A careful reader of Kimball's letter can see that his critique actually confirms the accuracy of my review, or at least that I did not "grossly misrepresent the nature of his work."

Nevertheless, I do understand why Kimball might be less than pleased by my review. Much like the preceding paragraph, I used the documentary evidence he provided in his book to develop an explanation and assessment of the Nixon administration's efforts to end the Vietnam War that was diametri-

cally opposed to his analysis. In other words, after summarizing Kimball's gloomy view of the Nixon White House, I offered a brief commentary on why I believed that the documentary evidence justified a more positive view of Nixon's and Kissinger's efforts to extract the United States from the Vietnam War. By using triangular diplomacy to detach North Vietnam from its patrons in Moscow and Beijing, Nixon and Kissinger succeeded in altering the military balance in Southeast Asia, forcing Hanoi to the negotiating table. Nixon and Kissinger made the most of what in hindsight still appears to be the incredibly weak diplomatic and military hand dealt to it by previous administrations. Kimball states that my positive assessment of Nixon and Kissinger's diplomacy is wrong, not in agreement with his view of events, and is not derived from the proper "historiographic context," which seems to imply that the review is outside mainstream scholarship. In a short letter it is impossible to explore the merits of my argument or the origins of my allegedly inappropriate ideas. However, in my view the documents provided by *The Vietnam War Files* offer ample evidence for my interpretation of the Nixon administration's effort to end the war in Southeast Asia.

"Historical research" will "advance" because of scholarly disagreement over the interpretation of facts, not by the effort to preserve proper historiography.

—James J. Wirtz,  
Dean of International Graduate Studies,  
U.S. Naval Postgraduate School