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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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## The History Lessons Henry A. (Heinz Alfred) Kissinger Never Learned from his Interventions in Southeast Asia

*Unapologetic and unrepentant he remained till the end. His destruction of peaceful societies justified at the altar of his deep commitment to his warmongering policies, his bizarre humor on display even when bombing innocent civilians. The documentary record shows him laughing through the Paris Peace Talks, through the Christmas Bombings of North Vietnam that he ordered to force Hanoi back to the negotiating table. The same peace agreement that he accepted in January 1973 was on offer earlier. In the end, he prolonged the Vietnam War.*

**T**he passing of the extraordinary American diplomat, Henry Kissinger, who was born in 1923 and died in November 2023, revives old traumas and awakens dark memories of his policies that killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Southeast Asia. A Cold War hero to many Americans, he made himself indispensable to U.S. presidents as a smarter diplomat than any at home or abroad. He was a by-product of the Cold War which, in turn, enabled him to capture center stage in U.S. policymaking by cynically playing upon Americans' insecurities of their place in the world, and their fear of a resurgent



Soviet Union. And it was the end of the Cold War that made him redundant. His reputation was intact as long as the Cold War—and the Cold War mentality—remained in force. When it ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990–91, the world understood that the enemy that Secretary of State Kissinger had created did not exist, and his tactics were seen as abhorrent by global populations now grasping at peace.

Kissinger was born as Heinz Alfred Kissinger in Germany. Life for the Jewish Kissinger family became difficult after the Nazis seized power and imposed state sanctioned anti-Semitism. In 1938, when Kissinger's family immigrated to the United States and settled in New York, Kissinger's name was changed to Henry.<sup>1</sup>

I shared a stage with him at a U.S. Department of State conference, “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946–1975,” at the department's East Auditorium in the George C. Marshall Conference Center in Washington, D.C. on September 29–30, 2010. The State Department's Office of the Historian had selected my paper on the People's Diplomacy of Vietnam, which I delivered at the conference the day after Kissinger gave his lecture. I was representing the institutions where I was teaching, the University of Toronto and Trent University. I understood that the State Department's historians had chosen my paper because it was something of a rarity that presented the Vietnamese view of the war based on documents I had collected at the National Archives in Hanoi. At the time, most historical studies were written from an Anglo-American perspective, and my use of Vietnamese papers impressed them.

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<sup>1</sup>Biographies of the Secretaries of State: Henry A. (Heinz Alfred) Kissinger (1923–), Office of the Historian, Department of State, Washington, DC, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/people/kissinger-henry-a>

The opening speech at the conference was delivered by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who welcomed Kissinger back to the State Department, followed by comments by Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, and Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell, as well by Vietnamese Ambassador Tran Van Tung and Dr. Nguyen Manh Ha. In the audience, Hillary spotted former Deputy Secretary John Negroponte, and she welcomed experts from universities from around the world who had come to present their papers.<sup>2</sup>

The development of good relations between Vietnam and the United States “has been breathtaking,” she noted. The U.S.-Vietnam trade agreement had created jobs and spurred growth on both sides of the Pacific. “Our friendship has become an anchor of security and stability in the region,” and “an entire generation of young people has grown up knowing only peace between Vietnam and America” through educational and cultural exchanges.<sup>3</sup> Hillary did not say a word about the U.S. bombings of Cambodia and Vietnam ordered by Kissinger, who was sitting in the front row. It was not her style.



Dr. Henry A. Kissinger speaking at the conference, “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975,” at the State Department, Washington, DC. Source: the Office of the Historian, State Department.

Right after her, Kissinger walked on to the stage. The only U.S. national security adviser to also serve concurrently as secretary of state talked us through the reasons underlying his advice to President Richard Nixon on the ways to prosecute the war in Vietnam. “I believe that most of what went wrong in Vietnam we did to ourselves,” he said. But, he added, “I would have preferred another outcome, at least another outcome that was not so intimately related to the way we tore ourselves apart. And you have to understand that this was my view then and it is my view now.”<sup>4</sup>

It was clear from the very outset of his twenty-seven-minute lecture (he said he would speak for twenty and kept close to his promise) that he had neither changed his views on the correctness of the American intervention in Vietnam, nor about his desire to create a U.S.-backed regime in Saigon that he believed would have been a democratic one. The Vietnamese aspiration for the reunification of the country was not something that he cared about.

Kissinger did not bring up the secret bombings of Cambodia that he authorized, and the relentless bombardment of Vietnam. These inhumane acts that killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians were subsumed into the Nixon-Kissinger policy of creating a free and democratic South Vietnam to serve as a model state for the rest of Southeast Asia. So closely were the two men involved in burning the midnight oil that they—and their policies—came to be known as Nixinger. The duo used the National Security Council staff to concentrate power in the White House—that is to say, within themselves. They usually left the State Department out of the loop. The White House’s

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<sup>4</sup> Address by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975,” State Department, September 29, 2010, <https://history.state.gov/conferences/2010-southeast-asia/secretary-kissinger>

relations with the department were not cordial. So, when Kissinger was invited to lecture on Vietnam at the State Department, he must have been more than a little surprised. The audience broke into spontaneous laughter when he began his speech with these words, “I must point out that I hold one record that will be hard to exceed, that during the period that I was both Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, relations between the State Department and the White House were at an unprecedented high.”

The use of excessive military force—outlawed by the United Nations—was of little concern to the great diplomat who only valued the expansion of American power. The use of excessive force was subsumed into the finery and finesse of diplomatese.

It was clear that Kissinger relished his engagements with his North Vietnamese counterparts in the peace talks in Paris through the late 1960s and early 1970s. In his lecture, he said that he had recently read a book published in Hanoi about his peace talks with North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho, which was, “I would say, 98 percent accurate.” He added, “it brought home again one fundamental difference: America wanted compromise; Hanoi wanted victory.”<sup>5</sup>

Kissinger did not disappoint in his recollection of the past. In his day-to-day dealings he found Le Duc Tho “at the edge of obnoxiousness.” Tho “operated on us like a surgeon with a scalpel with enormous skill, always courteous, but he occasionally would be told from Hanoi, according to that book, to remember that there could be no negotiations until there had been a military change.”

Speaking respectfully in the presence of the Vietnamese ambassador, Kissinger said it was “very understandable” because the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



“Vietnamese had fought for 50 years not to make a compromise but to unify their country. The objective goal of American policy was to preserve a viable South Vietnam that would be given a chance to develop its own identity, and those were, in fact, daily concern objectives. That was a fact of life.”

Again, what Kissinger left out was also a fact of life. That the U.S. did not invite the South Vietnamese president or senior Saigon officials to participate in the Paris Peace Talks that took place bilaterally between the North Vietnamese and the Americans. Saigon was betrayed by the machinations of Nixinger.

“There was really only one issue that was not soluble, and that issue was: Should South Vietnam have its own political identity, be permitted to develop its own institutions, or should it be presumed from the beginning that unification was the objective,” Kissinger said. While various issues such as the ceasefire and troop withdrawals were more or less settled, “what was not settled is whether the existing government in South Vietnam could survive, would be permitted to survive. When that was agreed, we settled very quickly.”

Kissinger seemed to be articulating a “one country, two systems” model. An independent U.S.-backed South Vietnam was out of the question, as Nixon aimed to pull American troops out of the country, and Saigon forces were not up to the challenge of defending their land against the superior armies of the north. A “one country, two systems” model was never properly articulated or defended by Kissinger, who saw during the negotiations that Hanoi aimed at total reunification. With few cards left in his hand, Kissinger caved into North Vietnamese assurances that the south would be run by a provisional government during and after unification. That government was completely under Hanoi’s control.

The settlement was an American sell-out of its South Vietnamese ally. Nixon wanted out. His election slogan was Peace with Honor. But while U.S. bombing of Vietnam continued, there was no peace, and little honor in the U.S. betrayal of Saigon.

A jaded diplomat, who was unmoved by human suffering of the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians, was moved eventually by the success of cold policy. He explained, “I can tell you my most moving moment was when Le Duc Tho in October 1972, in effect, accepted the proposals that we had made in January of that year, about the structure of that government [Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam].<sup>6</sup> In fact, he even read a statement saying, ‘This is, after all, what you’ve proposed.’ And when he was finished, I shook hands with Winston [Lord, Special Assistant to the National Security Advisor] and said, ‘Well, we’ve done it.’ But it turned out we hadn’t done it for many reasons. Maybe it was objectively never possible, which I deny. But anyway, reasonable people can make this argument.”

Nixinger wanted to get out of Vietnam. Kissinger explained that “there were, at that point, 550,000—or 536,000 to be precise—American troops in Vietnam, and in the second half of 1968, the casualties ran at about 400 a week, the Tet Offensive having taken place

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<sup>6</sup> The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (PRG, Vietnamese: Chính phủ Cách mạng Lâm thời Cộng hòa miền Nam Việt Nam), was formed on June 8, 1969 by North Vietnam as an independent shadow government that opposed the government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) under President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, and then as a de facto country after the Fall of Saigon in 1975 under the name Republic of South Vietnam. The PRG was recognized as the government of South Vietnam by most socialist states and Malta. It signed the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement as an independent entity, that was separate from both South Vietnam and North Vietnam. It became the nominal government of South Vietnam as the Republic of South Vietnam following the Fall of Saigon. On July 2, 1976, the Republic of South Vietnam and North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) merged to form the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.



early that year.” The Tet Offensive, he admitted, “proved that the war was unwinnable.”

The peace negotiations had just started in 1968. The formal position of the United States was mutual withdrawal in which U.S. troops would begin departing after those of the North Vietnamese. “And the outgoing administration [of President Lyndon Johnson] left papers written by [Ambassador Averell] Harriman and [delegate to the Paris peace talks Cyrus] Vance, saying that after a settlement, 260,000 American troops would be needed to remain in Vietnam.”

Instead of apologizing for the bombardment of Cambodia (or of Vietnam, as the Kennedy-era senior official Robert McNamara had done), Kissinger mounted a defence of his strategy. “There were two schools of thought, of which really only one received serious consideration,” he said. “My personal view was that we should make a very sweeping comprehensive peace offer. And if that was rejected, step up military action and then see where we were.” Here, he was referring to the Nixinger doublespeak of achieving “Peace with Honour,” as well as fighting and talking at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

Kissinger recalled his early efforts to set up a direct or indirect line of communication with Hanoi. The White House asked former Deputy Secretary of Defense Secretary Cyrus Vance to go to Moscow to negotiate there with the Vietnamese. “And we gave the Soviets a proposal that went far beyond anything that had been proposed at the time. That was never answered. The Russians never answered; the Vietnamese never answered.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.





Kissinger then fell back on doing what came naturally. “We then sort of dilatorily studied enhanced military action, which is the subject of many investigative journalists. But the decision that was finally made was that we would withdraw gradually, negotiate concurrently, and hopefully reach a point at which Hanoi would agree to our basic political proposal. And over a period of four years we substantially achieved that objective.”<sup>9</sup>

Within the U.S. government there were officials that disapproved of the U.S. intervention in Cambodia. Kissinger was honest enough to admit to it, saying, “One of my associates was Winston Lord [Special Assistant to the National Security Advisor]. During the incursions of Cambodia, he wanted to resign. And I said to him, ‘Well, you can resign and walk around with a placard outside this building, or you can help me end this. And you have to ask yourself what you will feel better about 20 years from now.’ And he stayed.”<sup>10</sup>

Kissinger offered a specious reason why he prolonged the bombing of Cambodia—that the Khmer Rouge who had not yet come to power were fighting in the countryside, and that U.S. bombing would contain them. “The Chinese and we had made an agreement on Cambodia that was supposed to go into effect as soon as [Prince] Sihanouk came back from a trip [to Europe and Africa in 1973]. And the one part of it was the end of American bombing and in Cambodia, which was maintained because the Khmer Rouge did not observe the ceasefire.”

Kissinger took us deeper into the machinations. “Senator [Warren] Magnuson who was visiting China [in 1973], and he had a meeting with [Chinese prime minister] Zhou Enlai, and Zhou Enlai was

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



complaining about the American bombing in Cambodia which was his part of the deal. And Magnuson said, ‘Don’t worry about it. The Congress has just stopped it.’ Whereupon, Zhou Enlai flew into a rage and started pounding the table because he—that it turned out, that an agreement he had made did not make him look very effective.”

If the reader finds Kissinger’s response to be obfuscating, here is the explanation: At a meeting of China’s Ambassador Huang Chen with Kissinger and his deputies at San Clemente, California on July 6, 1973, Huang voiced concern: “Although the Chinese side had informed the U.S. side that negotiations between Samdech Sihanouk and the Phnom Penh traitorous clique [led by Lon Nol] would be impossible, the U.S. side nevertheless openly refused to negotiate with Samdech Sihanouk, which enraged him all the more.”<sup>11</sup> Huang’s remarks show that relations between the prince and Nixon-Kissinger were frosty as ever.

The Cold War had ended twenty years earlier, but Kissinger’s lecture was straight out of it. He attributed the American failure in Vietnam to the following factors. “The combination of Watergate and [U.S.] domestic divisions which cut aid to Vietnam by two-thirds, while oil prices were rising—that prohibited any military assistance to Vietnam, something we have not asked any ally to do at any point. So that is my perception of what happened.”<sup>12</sup> Later, in his presentation, he

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<sup>11</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger (Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs), Brent Scowcroft (Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs), Lawrence S. Eagleburger (Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Council Operations), and China’s Ambassador Huang Chen, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume xviii, China, 1973–1976, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v18/d41>

<sup>12</sup> Address by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946–1975,” State Department, September 29, 2010,

labeled the U.S. media as “destructive” in the way it dissented from U.S. policy in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Kissinger clearly implied that the American media and the antiwar movement had badly let him down. He cited these episodes to make a “fundamental point” that “we cannot afford a divided country and go to war. We owe it to ourselves to have confidence, at least, in the good faiths of our government. We cannot turn these issues into a moral contest between people who claim a monopoly of goodwill and describe by absolute, not just incorrect assessments, but amoral attitudes.”<sup>13</sup>

Kissinger lived in a different world from many Americans. The lessons that he learned from the American war in Vietnam were the wrong ones. He said, “there are a number of lessons we have to learn. When we consider going to war, we need a global strategic analysis that explains to us what the significance of this is. The purpose of a war is some definition of victory; stalemate is not a strategy, and victory needs to be defined as an outcome that is achievable in a period sustainable by American public opinion.”<sup>14</sup> Nowhere did he mention that one of the lessons is to never bomb innocent civilians in pursuit of the great goals of American foreign policy.

A last word on Kissinger’s capacity for misjudgement and his appetite for cruelty. Although the peace talks were often conducted in good humor, negotiations ended in failure in December 1972 with both sides blaming each other for the collapse. On December 19, Kissinger blamed the North Vietnamese for failing to adhere to the terms of the accord.<sup>15</sup> North Vietnam argued that the United States was attempting to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 180; and



blame it before the court of world opinion. Hanoi explained that the United States intended to continue its Vietnamization policy, and use military force to compel the Vietnamese to accept the terms imposed by the United States. For its part, the United States wanted the draft agreement modified in key areas, for now it refused to recognize the existence of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and it wanted the withdrawal of communist forces from the south.<sup>16</sup>

When the talks ended in failure, Nixon resumed the bombardment of North Vietnam during Christmas 1972 in order to force Hanoi to accept U.S. terms. Historians are divided whether the bombing tactic was a success or a failure. Some, including myself, argue that the tactic failed because the peace agreement signed eventually in January 1973 was the same one that Hanoi and Washington had rejected in December 1972. Gareth Porter has argued that the Christmas bombings made the Paris agreement possible because they forced Nixon and Kissinger to accept the very terms they had rejected in December.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the Christmas bombings failed to achieve their objective. Hanoi signed because it was an effortless way to get the United States out of Vietnam. The historian Pierre Asselin explains that the Christmas bombings did not fail, however.<sup>18</sup> North Vietnam agreed to resume peace talks on December 26 because the bombardment had crippled its vital

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Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 145.

<sup>16</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 116.

<sup>17</sup> Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Peace Agreement* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1975), 165.

<sup>18</sup> Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 164–5.



economic, industrial, and military organs, and jeopardized the revolution. Bombardment forced Hanoi back to the negotiation table. That was what it achieved. The bombing did not force North Vietnam to amend the agreement.

It was nothing but gratuitous cruelty on the part of Nixon and Kissinger to prolong the war. They had a peace agreement in hand in December 1972, and they could have signed it. They did not. They bombed North Vietnam over the Christmas holidays. They gained nothing. They signed the same agreement.

Till the end, Kissinger carried the burden of the unfinished task in Vietnam—to preserve the state of a U.S.-created Republic of Vietnam in the south, and to hold the war with the north at a stalemate so that Hanoi would not claim victory. He failed to achieve both these goals. In the end, he was left groping for an honorable way to get out of the quagmire of Vietnam.

Kissinger further explained, “I do not like the word ‘exit strategy.’ We shouldn’t be in if all we want is an exit. It has to be presented to the President as a sustainable diplomatic framework. Diplomacy and strategy must be treated as a whole, not as successive phases of policy. And above all, the Administration, as well as the critics, should conduct their debates with the restraint imposed by the knowledge that the unity of this country has been and will remain the hope of the world.”

At this stage, many of us in the audience exchanged a look of disbelief. His last words were, “And I want to express my respect to the Vietnamese who are here and my delight that relations between our two countries are as strong as they appear. But that does not alter my sadness at the way the Vietnam War was permitted to evolve.”

If Kissinger had his way, Vietnam would never be allowed to reunify, and the peninsula would remain in a permanent state of conflict. The Nobel Prize committee exhibited a complete lack of conscience in awarding the peace prize to Kissinger for his efforts in the Paris peace talks. His counterpart, Le Duc Tho, was also awarded the prize but declined to accept. Le wished to avoid being partnered with Kissinger when peace had yet to be achieved.

**A**ny assessment of Kissinger would remain half-baked if it ignored his sense of humor which did help soothe the prickliness of the peace talks in Paris. I deeply researched this aspect of the man for an article I wrote for *The Historian* journal using the Kissinger papers, then lodged at the U.S. National Archives in College Park, Maryland. The scene is set during the Peace Talks on October 10, 1972 in a villa on Avenue du General Leclerc in Paris. Negotiators from North Vietnam and the United States are hammering out the details of a draft peace agreement. In the middle of the session, negotiator Le Duc Tho requests Kissinger to include a promise within the draft agreement that the United States would not continue its military involvement in Vietnam after the peace agreement was signed. Tho also asks Kissinger to delete a clause that would allow the United States to keep its troops in Vietnam for sixty days after the ceasefire came into effect. Kissinger replies: “You won’t let us interfere for sixty days more?”<sup>19</sup> The participants break into laughter. The laughter is duly recorded by the note takers in the minutes of the meeting. After the laughter subsides, Tho retorts: “So you want to

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<sup>19</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, at Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, 10 October 1972 (Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD).



continue to interfere for sixty days more?” Kissinger responds: “It is a habit that is so hard to break.” There is more laughter, and Tho brings the proceedings back to seriousness with the comment: “once the war is ended this should not be so.”

In this encounter, both sides made light of the extremely serious issue of U.S. troop withdrawal. Yet, Tho used the opportunity to resist Kissinger’s desire to prolong the U.S. intervention for sixty days. The encounter encapsulated the central issue underlying the entire war in Vietnam—that of U.S. military interventions overseas, which, according to Kissinger, had become a “habit” that was difficult to break. The negotiators used humor in order to achieve several objectives during the peace talks, to break the ice and build rapport. But the North Vietnamese also used humor to demonstrate their resistance to U.S. power and raise Vietnamese morale during the talks from 1970–1972. They employed humor in two significant ways—during negotiations with the United States, and in works of popular art such as cartoons and caricatures—at a time when bombs were falling over North Vietnam. Although many humorous exchanges were initiated by Kissinger in Paris, the North Vietnamese often cracked jokes and always were quick with witty repartee. The fact that Kissinger delivered most of the laugh lines had a lot to do with his gregarious personality and his Western education. But after DRV negotiators warmed to the U.S. side they were much freer with their jokes. Kissinger’s humor was crafted to serve various purposes: Sometimes his humor exhibited U.S. diplomatic and military power, and at other times the jokes recognized the battlefield reality that the North Vietnamese could outlast U.S. forces in Vietnam. The participants at peace talks tailored the content of their jokes to mirror diplomatic and military realities on the ground in Vietnam and the gathering antiwar maelstrom in U.S. domestic sphere.



The one-hundred-year-old Kissinger kept his humor—often bordering on the bizarre—till the end.

I made my presentation on the “People’s Diplomacy of Vietnam” on the second day of the conference on “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975.” Kissinger was not present, having left the George C. Marshall Conference Center right after his own lecture. At one point in my presentation, I cited examples of prominent Americans who dissented from American policy in Vietnam, and actually visited that country to see the real, human face of the Vietnamese whom U.S. officials were demonizing as rabid Communists. On returning to the United States after visiting North Vietnam, some antiwar activists met with State Department officials in an attempt to persuade them to halt the bombardment of their country. For instance, the Ohio-born Rabbi Abraham Feinberg, who met Ho Chi Minh in January 1967, insisted that the American bombardment of Vietnam was a violation of international law under the Geneva Agreements and the UN Charter, and it was fruitless because the Vietnamese people “could not be terrorized into submission by any foreign power.”<sup>20</sup>

And in an attempt at informal diplomacy, the rabbi, who preached at the Holy Blossom Jewish temple in Toronto, briefed the State Department official, William Smyser, in Washington, DC about an invitation that Feinberg was carrying from Ho Chi Minh for President Lyndon Johnson to visit Hanoi for peace talks. Here’s what happened

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<sup>20</sup> Harish C. Mehta, “People’s Diplomacy of North Vietnam,” paper presented at “The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975” conference, at the U.S. State Department, “Force and Diplomacy: Fighting while Negotiating in the Vietnam War,” <https://history.state.gov/conferences/2010-southeast-asia/fighting-while-negotiating>





next. Feinberg phones the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Arthur Goldberg, in January 1967. And Goldberg tells Feinberg that he disapproves of the fact that Feinberg had actually released to the media Ho Chi Minh's invitation before actually delivering it to the State Department. At any rate, Feinberg pleads and he gets Goldberg to deliver the message personally to LBJ because Goldberg was having lunch with LBJ the same afternoon.

The North Vietnamese put on their best face in the conduct of people's diplomacy. They fielded a number of little-known actors. There was a gentleman called Hoang Quoc Viet, who was keenly watched and reported upon by American observers of this time. Central Intelligence Agency reports frequently threw up his name as a talented agitator. And so, when the Yale University historian Staughton Lynd and the American peace activist Tom Hayden visited Hanoi, Hoang welcomed them at the airport. And both of them thought that Viet was a trade unionist, and that because he was a trade unionist he tended to exaggerate the overall opposition of American workers to the American intervention and participation in the war. The American antiwar duo also met another gentleman at the airport called Do Xuan Oanh, the Permanent Secretary of the North Vietnamese Peace Committee, who served as their guide and friend at most of these visits.

Through these conversations, people like Lynd and Hayden were convinced that the Vietnamese revolutionaries were seeking to create a humane socialism and not a ruthless communist dictatorship. And Oanh also explained that he wanted to educate the people of North Vietnam about American dissidents in order to reduce hatred among the Vietnamese people for the Americans. So, when they returned home, Lynd and Hayden tried in vain to convince State Department officials that the Vietnamese were ready to negotiate. Instead of listening to their



pleas, American officials threatened to withdraw their passports on the grounds they had violated the Logan Act, which prohibits American citizens from conducting diplomacy outside of official channels.

And then we saw in September 1966 the American activist David Dellinger visited Hanoi, where Oanh arranged meetings with Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. And Ho Chi Minh made a deep impression on Dellinger, who found him gentle and sincere. Although Dellinger was a dedicated pacifist, he excused revolutionary violence in this case as necessary for the defense of Vietnam against foreign aggression.

And, following these early visits, the North Vietnamese began to formalize a system of hospitality as part of this whole people's diplomacy idea, based on the seniority and importance of the visitors. The Hanoi authorities grouped foreign visitors into two levels, based on their power and ability to influence the outside world. Nobel Prize winners, well-known university professors, famous writers and filmmakers were identified as A-level guests, while rank-and-file activists were B-level guests. The A-level guests were accommodated at the best hotels, they ate at the best restaurants that war-ravaged North Vietnam could offer, and the B-level guests were put up at various government guest houses and ordinary hotels. Usually, foreign visitors paid for their own air tickets, and the North Vietnamese extended local hospitality, including meals and the cost of an accompanying translator. For instance, three important antiwar activists who fell into the A-level were linguistics professor Noam Chomsky, economist Douglas Dowd, and the pastor Dick Fernandez.

What did Kissinger think of these American activists? As he explained in his lecture, he thought of them as impediments to the American government's goal of achieving victory in Vietnam. He had,

admittedly, pulled his assistant Winston Lord back from the brink of joining the activists. Yet, there was little that Kissinger could ever do to stop the antiwar juggernaut.

Still, he (and his U.S. government colleagues) tried. The U.S. authorities not only seized the passports of Americans that visited Vietnam, but they also tried to sabotage the Bertrand Russell Tribunal. A matter of growing alarm to officials in Washington were the transnational links between Ho Chi Minh and the British philosopher Bertrand Russell. They got together to create the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, which then created the International War Crimes Tribunal (IWCT) to bring to trial Lyndon Johnson and the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense for war crimes in Vietnam, for having used chemical weapons, and genocidal strategies.<sup>21</sup>

The people of Vietnam used the IWCT to their advantage in their own propaganda. It was not just Ho Chi Minh and Bertrand Russell that were involved here. The people's organizations of Vietnam played a very important role in liaising with Russell in London through the *Cuu Quoc* weekly magazine, because Ho Chi Minh obviously could not be there personally, and Russell was too old to travel. He was ninety years old by this time.

The North Vietnamese performed an important and unacknowledged role in the creation of the war crimes tribunal. The historical literature has ignored the fact that they were actually financial stakeholders in the international war crimes tribunal. The fact that Ho Chi Minh contributed in total 50,000 new francs and doubled the amount on getting these activists over to investigate instances of war crimes in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



Vietnam, which made the Vietnamese fairly important owners, literally, of the Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal.<sup>22</sup>

And of course, the American authorities did everything they could to denounce and disrupt, through various ways. The Central Intelligence Agency got into the act and tried to sabotage the tribunal. Under Secretary of State George Ball played a key role in spreading disinformation and persuading foreign heads of state to quit their association with the war crimes tribunal.<sup>23</sup>

My whole argument is that Kissinger's grand American diplomacy came up against an unlikely foe in Vietnam's people's diplomacy that deserves recognition as a powerful force that the embattled people of Vietnam employed in conjunction with the peace movement abroad to exert popular pressure on the American government to end the war. Without people's diplomacy, American leaders would have been less restrained, and they might have tried to prolong the war.

**R**ising Asia Journal begins the fourth year of publishing with our Winter/Spring 2024 issue. Our authors offer articles on a mix of Asian geographies—Singapore and Malaysia, the Himalayas, Southeast Asia, the Republic of Vietnam that fell in 1975, China, Sri Lanka, and India's northeastern Arunachal Pradesh—seen through the lens of historical archival research and contemporary event analysis, as well as textual deconstruction.

*The Straits Times* editorial writer, Asad Latif, writes that Tharman Shanmugaratnam's landslide victory in Singapore's presidential election

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



in September 2023 signposts that Singaporeans are less interested in their president's former political affiliations than in how well he can safeguard the future of that island city-state in an unstable world. Latif adds that the future cannot but be a multiracial one. Tharman's ethnicity, he explains, did not propel him to victory. It was the absence of ethnically-based political choices among the majority Chinese that did so.

Professor Vimal Khawas of the Special Centre for the Study of North East India at Jawaharlal Nehru University, writes about the lessons delivered by the Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF) in the Upper Teesta catchment areas of Sikkim and Darjeeling Himalayas in October 2023. A specialist in disaster management in North East India, Khawas explains that Sikkim should now concentrate on the efficient handling of the already constructed and commissioned hydropower projects instead of venturing into new ones. There should be proper human coordination and an Early Warning System in place to manage the functional dams, he writes. A small mistake upstream will have a tremendous human and environmental impact downstream.

The former Indian diplomat, Gurjit Singh, who served as ambassador to Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, writes that the absence of ASEAN, both from certain new global formations and from key United Nations groups, raises questions about the role the regional organization is playing. The author also suggests that the time has come to reboot India-ASEAN relations in the interest of both sides, in order to stay relevant. India and ASEAN will not benefit from strategic autonomy in a multipolar world, he argues. They would do well to engage each other more, and recognize that they are both important poles of a multipolar order.

Trần Ứng Thùy Trang, a junior year student at Fulbright University Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City, explores the film industry of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), using archival materials and library resources in Vietnam. She argues that after the Fall of Saigon in 1975, Communist Vietnamese film critics in the newly unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) widely cited the 1972 South Vietnamese film, *The Faceless Lover*, as an example of neo-colonialist psychological warfare. In response to their critiques, Trần explores the role of the state in constructing Southern Vietnamese war cinema. She argues that the critical and commercial success of *The Faceless Lover* results from the rise of privatized cinema supported by cinema policy renewals in the early 1970s and mainstream reception of melodrama during the Second Republic of Vietnam, instead of serving any neo-imperialist agenda. Her paper concerns the lack of film studies scholarship on the cinema of the RVN after 1975, which stems from a systematic erasure of RVN films under the Communist SRV.

Three Northeast Indian scholars, Ajay Kumar Pandey, Man Norbu, and Punyo Yarang, present their field research on the new experiment with the Self-Help Groups of Arunachal Pradesh, which is an under-studied topic. Their case study of SHGs illustrates the comprehensive development of women occurring on multiple fronts, alongside the challenges they encounter. The paper, largely based on primary data collected during a field study carried out in 2021, aims to understand how SHGs impact tribal women economically and how these groups help raise their economic awareness. On the ground, women continue facing challenges such as limited finance and market access. The authors recommend that for women to gain equality with men, they need better financial support and market opportunities. With the right

support, the SHGs can have a large economic impact by raising members' incomes and contributing to a more prosperous community.

Tian Mashuang, a PhD student in the Department of History, School of Humanities at Tsinghua University in Beijing, presents the second part of his series on the botanical incubation of tea plantations in South Asia. While the first article illustrated the early imagination and blueprints created by botanists to establish a tea industry in South Asia, the second article concentrates on how those botanical "business plans" were realized in the mid-nineteenth century. Mashuang uses historical documents to recreate the saga of "amateur capitalists" who devised and incubated the tea industry with the help of the botanical infrastructure in Calcutta, Saharanpur, Peradeniya, and Hakgalla. Those pioneers were botanists and naturalists such as Joseph Banks, Robert Kyd, George Govan, John Forbes Royle, Hugh Falconer, Nathaniel Wallich, and their Ceylon counterparts H.T. Normansell and G.H.K. Thwaites. The story of tea manifested in the multi-species universalism of plants, animals, people, and knowledge, as well as the cosmopolitan connections among academic and commercial establishments across the borders of India, China, Sri Lanka, and the colonial power, Great Britain.

We are delighted to introduce a new section, "The Rising Asia Roundtable Review." In our first Roundtable we present a review of Ang Cheng Guan's new book, *Singapore's Grand Strategy* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2023). The participants in the Roundtable Review are Editor-in-Chief Harish C. Mehta, who has written the Introduction; Associate Professor of International Relations Manjeet S. Pardesi from Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand who focuses on Singapore's (thus far) successful Grand Strategy of ensuring success; Bich Tran, postdoctoral fellow at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, who shows that historian Ang fills a

gap in the literature dominated by political scientists; and Dr. Toh Han Shih, Chief Analyst at Headland Intelligence in Hong Kong, who argues that Singapore's Grand Strategy has been effective, but can it work amidst worsening U.S.-China tensions? The last article in the Roundtable is "The Author's Response" by Ang Cheng Guan, Associate Dean of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, who explains that Singapore's Grand Strategy is always dynamic and is not cast in stone.

In our regular section, "The Rising Asia Review of Books," we present reviews by Vinod Kumar Pillai and Salikyu Sangtam. In his review of *Regime Resilience in Malaysia and Singapore*, edited by Greg Lopez and Bridget Welsh (Selangor: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre / Singapore: World Scientific, 2023), Vinod, an independent scholar, explains that this volume, authored by academics, provides a multi-dimensional look at the contributory factors and dynamics that facilitate regime resilience even when the governance is far from ideal, with skewed wealth distribution, restricted citizens' freedom, and a hybrid democracy with authoritarian tendencies. The essays offer insights into the reasons why regimes could hold on to power for decades and why democratization need not be a natural course of development. It must be noted that this volume does not focus on the remarkable economic progress made by Malaysia and Singapore for which the regimes in power deserve credit, presumably in order to keep its thrust on the theme of the book which is to examine regime resilience in the face of shortfalls in democratization.

Salikyu Sangtam, Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tetso College in Dimapur, India, reviews Ching-hwang Yen's, *While East Meets West: A Chinese Diaspora Scholar and Social Activist in Asia-Pacific* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2022). Yen





nostalgically remembers his experiences from his early days in China to his retirement in Australia. In his review Salikyu writes that there is always a melancholic tone to nostalgia, that it is the author's way of suggesting that though a return to the past is not possible, we must nevertheless take cognizance of the importance of such nostalgic remembrance to enrich our understanding of what it is to be truly human. Salikyu finds that the book makes us appreciate, and not take for granted, the varied experiences that make us who we are.

*Rising Asia Journal*, now in its fourth year, will continue publishing **R**articles of excellence in our niche area of the Eastern World. We produce the only peer-reviewed journal based in India that is dedicated to the coverage of India's northeast, Southeast Asia, and East Asia (China, Japan, and the Koreas). We welcome research articles, columns, and book reviews in our areas of interest. Please see our "Submission Policy" <https://www.rajraf.org/submission-policy>