

# The Kissinger Diaries: What He Really Thought about Vietnam

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It has long been assumed that Henry Kissinger “supported” the Vietnam War throughout the 1960s—and that this was one of the reasons Richard Nixon offered him the job of national security adviser. **This view is incorrect.** As his private papers and diaries make clear, Kissinger realized by 1966 at the latest that the U.S. intervention in defense of South Vietnam was a doomed enterprise and that only a diplomatic solution would end the conflict.

From a very early stage, Kissinger understood the nature of the problem the United States faced. “All history proves that there is no cheap and easy way to defeat guerrilla movements,” he wrote in February 1962. “South Vietnam has been plagued by Communist Viet Cong attacks ever since it became independent in 1954. Their defeat can only be accomplished by adequate military force. ... However, merely physical security will not solve the problem. The people of South Vietnam must develop a long-term commitment to their government if they wish to attain political and economic stability.” **But how could that happen if the United States undermined the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government,** as happened in 1963, when the Kennedy administration approved a bloody coup against the government of Ngo Dinh Diem? When the news broke of Diem’s murder, Kissinger denounced U.S. policy as “shameful.” “Conditions in Vietnam will, in my judgment, get worse,” he warned.

In October 1965 Kissinger flew to Saigon at the invitation of the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. An expert on European history and nuclear strategy, Kissinger had never previously been to Vietnam. He knew little if anything about the country’s history and not a word of its language. But he already knew one thing: This was a war that could not be won by military means. After briefings in Washington before his trip, he jotted down some revealing notes. “Must realize,” he wrote, “that only possible outcome is limited one ... in which VC [Viet Cong, the Communist guerrillas] have some kind of role.” Such a compromise solution was the only good option available. Outright victory in South Vietnam was unattainable because “we know nothing about nation-building.”

Stopping in Honolulu on his way to Vietnam, he met with Lieutenant General Paul S. Emrick, the Pacific Command chief of staff. Emrick assured him “that all the soldiers in Vietnam were being trained to be good will ambassadors handing out candy and defending the villages.” Kissinger replied drily that “perhaps the problem was not only friendship but physical security against assassination. Many people in American cities are paying for protection against gangsters. This doesn’t mean that they love the gangsters; it simply proves that the police are not able to protect them.”

The more U.S. military briefings he heard, the more pessimistic Kissinger became. The fact was that “no one could really explain to me how even on the most favorable assumptions about the war in Vietnam the [war] was going to end.” **No one really had a plan for pacification.** No one really knew how infiltration was happening. His conclusion was as bleak as it was prescient:

*I am quite convinced that too much planning in the government and a great deal of military planning assumes that the opponent is stupid and that he will fight the kind of war for which one is best prepared. However ... the essence of guerrilla warfare is never to fight the kind of war your opponent expects. Having moved very many large units into Vietnam ... we must not become prisoners now of a large-unit mentality. Otherwise I think that we will face the problem of psychological exhaustion.*

Perhaps most unnerving of all were the warnings to Kissinger to stick close to the U.S. embassy and other secure installations as “the losses to the terrorist activity in Saigon were much greater than was being announced.” His parents had good reason to pray for his safe return.

At first sight, Saigon looked safe. It was, Kissinger recorded in his diary, just “like Washington in August ... though for some reason [the humidity] does not have quite the enervating effect that it does in a heat wave in the United States.” He found the late summer heat “soft and all enveloping ... almost as if you could feel the air physically.” The only problem was that the “constant alteration between air conditioned individual offices and the slightly steamy atmosphere outside causes almost everybody to suffer from a cold.” Kissinger went for a swim at the Cercle Sportif, “which is what passes for the exclusive swimming club in Saigon.” It was “like everything else here ... run down and somewhat dilapidated,” but it offered a pleasant relief from the heat. He was shocked to hear from a French girl he met at the pool that the magnificent beaches to the north of Saigon (sic!) were no longer safe because they were being used “as a rest and recuperation area for the Vietcong.”

To a man who had seen entire towns laid waste in northern Europe in 1944–45, the atmosphere of Saigon was perplexingly unwarlike:

*When I was in combat during World War II, or when I visited Korea for the Department of the Army in 1951, one knew precisely when one was in a danger zone and while one was in the danger zone the chances of attack were more or less constant, say 10–20%. In Saigon and throughout Vietnam, one is in a way constantly in a danger zone but there is no appearance of physical danger whatever. At the front in World War II or in Korea one heard the guns and one could almost sense the physical approach of danger. In Saigon everything appears perfectly normal and there is really no choice except conducting one's business as if one were in downtown New York. If danger should ever materialize, it will be sudden, unexpected, and would have an almost 100% certainty of success. The result is, curiously enough, that there is never any particular fear.*

The only sign of insecurity he saw on his first day was that “when cars stop at intersections people look around into adjoining cars and start tensing when people walk up ... because it would, of course, be an easy matter to drop a grenade into the car and one would never know whether the Vietnamese driver had not brought one to an ambush deliberately.” Kissinger himself felt safe. It was everyone else who was jumpy. He was woken up one night by “a fusillade of shots,” but this was because one of the **embassy guards had discharged his rifle by accident**, “whereupon all the guards, and above all the Vietnamese on the outside of the compound, began firing like mad, even though there were no targets.”

Kissinger was not content to remain in Saigon, as many American civilians felt safer doing. On October 26 he flew to Hue, the old Vietnamese capital, nestling on the banks of the Perfume River in a valley ringed by high mountains. As they explored the town on foot, he could not fail to notice that he and his State Department escort were the only Americans in the street. Hue was just over 60 miles south of the demilitarized zone that separated North and South Vietnam, running just below the 17th parallel. Kissinger was not foolhardy, at least not at first. When the dean of Hue University urged him to visit an imperial tomb less than three miles outside the city—an area of such heavy Vietcong concentration that he was advised it would take three platoons to get him there—he declined. But one of the Buddhist leaders he wanted to interview insisted on meeting at a pagoda some distance from the town center. Kissinger bleakly noted that “if the VC were in fact as pervasive as the situation indicated it would be an easy matter to knock us off on the way there.” His escort from the embassy, a young John Negroponce, replied that “**the VC never engaged in indiscriminate assassination**, that if they shot at us we would have the consolation of knowing that we had been singled out for specified targets.”

Kissinger also flew—through a thunderstorm in a twin-engine Beechcraft Model 18—to the “hair-raising” airstrip at Pleiku, which had been the scene of a heavy mortar attack earlier that year. The terminus of the strategically vital Route 19 from the coast, Pleiku was the headquarters of the South Vietnamese Second Corps and was occupied at the time of Kissinger's visit by two Vietnamese divisions, one American division, and one South Korean division. **It was essentially besieged**: beyond a radius of only 10 miles from the town center, it was too dangerous to drive at night. The American compound was surrounded by sandbags, barbed wire and mortar shelters. As Kissinger noted, it looked “like one of these frontier towns inside a stockade [from] the movies about the West on television.”

Kissinger saw a lot of Vietnam in just three weeks. He saw a lot of key decision makers too, beginning right at the top on October 16 with Gen. William Westmoreland, the commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)—a force that by the end of his posting in 1968 would have grown to more than half a million

men. As far as Westmoreland was concerned, the only question Kissinger needed to address was “how long it will take our programmed military efforts to accomplish the **objective of pacifying the country.**” The answer was that 60 percent of the population would be under government control within 19 months—not 18 or 20—and that after another 18 months that proportion would have risen to 80 percent.

Kissinger heard similar things from other senior officers. “If I listened to everybody’s description of how they were succeeding,” he remarked to Lodge, “it was not easy for me to see how the Vietcong were still surviving.” It was the same story at Pleiku, where “briefers at the Second Corps headquarters claimed [that] 68% of the population was under government control.” Kissinger was disgusted. “Since I have last had contact with it,” he noted scornfully, “the Army has degenerated. They have produced a group of experts in giving briefings whose major interest is to overpower you with floods of **meaningless statistics and to either kid themselves or deliberately kid you.**” When he asked the Pleiku briefers “how much of the population which was technically under their control was also under their control at night,” they answered only 30 percent. Kissinger did not believe this either, but even if it were true, “it indicates the enormity of the problem. It also indicate[s] that we can go from technical victory to technical victory and **not really advance in the major problem of establishing control over the population.**”



Kissinger pays a farewell visit to Premier Nguyen Cao Ky at his office in Saigon on July 28, 1966. | AP Photo

In fact, **the majority of Americans Kissinger spoke to in Vietnam were much less optimistic** than Westmoreland and his MACV mouthpieces. The **CIA agents Kissinger met in Hue were even more pessimistic.** As far as they could establish, 80 percent of the province’s population was under VC control at night, while in the hamlets listed as pacified, “the authorities hole up with their protective forces in their houses and pray that the VC will not attack them.” Nor were lower-level army officers any more sanguine. As one at Pleiku pointed out to Kissinger, “they had managed to assemble six battalions or two regiments twenty miles from Pleiku at Pleime. **We did not know it until they had attacked us.** The terrain was such that it was simply impossible to check infiltration routes. I asked the briefers how long they thought it would take to finish the job; they said a minimum of five and more likely ten years.”

Kissinger noted with disapproval the extent of American prejudice toward the Vietnamese. To the CIA head of station, **“the Vietnamese were the most devious people in the world,” compared with whom “the Chinese were models of straightlacedness and directness.”** According to Habib’s team at the embassy, **the South Vietnamese “never believe[d] anything that they were being told and [always] assumed that there was some devious reason” for everything.** The weary American consul in Hue said simply that in Vietnam “anything could happen”; or as Kissinger put it, he had “accepted the Vietnamese attitude ... in which a miracle becomes an ordinary event.”

Kissinger himself had an altogether different reaction to the Vietnamese he met. He was struck “by **the dignity of the average Vietnamese**. One never sees the squalor and ... frenzy of India. One never sees a vulgar Vietnamese. This is a tough and impressive people; if not necessarily an extremely attractive one.” Kissinger based his positive view of the Vietnamese on around a dozen meetings with members of both the government and the non-Communist opposition. What they had to say to him was characterized more by **candor** than by deviousness. One spoke for many in South Vietnam when he said that “when peace is achieved you will suddenly lose interest in us and you will leave us to our own devices; you will reduce your aid; you will bring back your people, and then what are we going to do[?]” **Even at this early stage, the South Vietnamese knew that negotiations between Washington and Hanoi would not bode well for them.**

Kissinger wrote but never sent a “rough draft” of his final report to Ambassador Lodge, realizing that it would be far too negative for Lodge’s taste. It is a damning indictment of the American predicament. It was possible, Kissinger wrote, that the military situation would improve, even allowing for the “overoptimistic” predictions of the military. **Success, however, would depend on “the ability to create a political structure to fill the void created by twenty years of civil war, ten years of systematic Vietcong assassination of key officials and two years of political upheavals in Saigon.”** The Saigon government was “in a precarious position,” **lacking cohesion, its authority in the countryside “still weak,” its centralized bureaucracy “cumbersome.”**

In the provinces, civil war and political turmoil in Saigon have produced a combination of ... **demoralization and lethargy**. Assassinations, incompetence, governmental change all place a premium on hedging bets. As one follows programs from Saigon into the provinces one is struck by how many peter out and how many of those of which remnants can be detected are beside the point. ... The mere fact that many high sounding programs have been initiated and then collapsed has induced a general atmosphere of cynicism and demoralization. This weakness was the key to the Vietnamese conundrum, for it explained the extreme difficulty of defeating the **Vietcong, whose nocturnal control over rural areas Kissinger now put as high as 85 percent**. Indeed, Kissinger suspected that “in many areas government survives only by means of a **tacit agreement with the Vietcong whereby both sides coexist** without getting into each other’s way.” In these areas, counterinsurgency resembled “a professional wrestling match.” Elsewhere, South Vietnamese corps commanders enjoyed “an autonomy verging on war-lordism.” **“Provincial government was “the weakest link in the chain.”**

Under these circumstances, American efforts were more likely to be counterproductive than productive. “Our exploding bureaucracy leads to a proliferation of programs,” he wrote, which tended at once to overwhelm and to undermine the South Vietnamese regime’s own efforts. In a memorable image, U.S. aid was a fire hydrant; South Vietnamese state capacity was like a garden hose. There was also a woeful lack of interagency cooperation: Because each agency is above all eager to push its own programs there is a tendency to operate through what is in effect a series of non-aggression treaties. Unless one agency’s program directly impinges on another element of the mission, there is a premium on not challenging it for fear of submitting one’s own cherished projects to general scrutiny. This process avoids direct competition; it also encourages proliferating bureaucracies and a tendency to try to avoid choices by attempting to carry out every available option, a course which given the scarcity of available resources—especially in trained manpower—is bound to produce disappointments.

The challenge the United States had taken on was to try to **“build a nation in a divided society in the middle of a civil war.”** But there was a chronic gap between conception and execution because of the “virtual collapse of Vietnamese civilian administration in the provinces and the American tendency to do too much too quickly on too vast a scale.”

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When Kissinger returned to Vietnam in July 1966, not much had changed. Lodge was “very chipper and described to me again as he had already in October that the war was practically won.” Westmoreland explained how he was “keep[ing] the Vietcong main force units constantly on the move.” The MACV briefers rattled off the usual pacification statistics. The new CIA team assured him that “Vietcong morale was becoming shaky.” Meanwhile, **the South Vietnamese ministers were worse than ever, shrugging their shoulders about corruption and inefficiency as if such things were a “basic fact of life.”** The minister of rural reconstruction appeared intent on using the pacification program to build his own private army. The South Vietnamese army, Daniel Ellsberg told him, was “almost totally useless in operations against main forces.” Without better provincial administration, “we were simply shuffling dirt against the wind.”

Never one to shirk the front line, Kissinger set off to see for himself. His first stop was Bien Hoa, the location of a major U.S. military base just 16 miles from Saigon. Despite this proximity, his request to go there by road was denied because “there had been a sniper on the road and ... it would be too risky.” Unnervingly—“another sign of the situation”—his helicopter “had two machine guns on either side and a machine gun at the front. As we approached the [airstrip] ... the machine guns were trained on the ground.” The CIA man in Bien Hoa was especially discouraging: “[H]e would have to say there wasn’t one village in the whole province in which he as an individual would be prepared to sleep at night as a regular matter. And even though 50% of the hamlets were listed as pacified, he would not be prepared to sleep in more than 25% of them as a one shot affair.” Back in his helicopter, Kissinger flew on to the First Division’s headquarters, which were in a rubber plantation 30 miles from the Cambodian border. Looking down, he could see Vietcong trails in the jungle, Vietcong roadblocks and blown bridges along the Route 13 north-south highway.

A few days later he spent the night with the Ninth Marines at Hill 55, 10 miles southwest of Da Nang, the focal point of an area “fifteen miles deep and maybe thirty miles long” that was supposedly under U.S. control. A different kind of war was being waged here from the one Westmoreland had described to him: a counterinsurgency campaign aimed at rooting out bands of guerrillas rather than a “search and destroy” hunt for large Vietcong formations. As Kissinger noted in his diary, however, “the job here was a slow, dirty grinding one.” Very slow: Over breakfast, two Marine colonels admitted that “the mining was no less in the areas which had been held by the Marines since the beginning than in those newly pacified.”

Kissinger then flew on to Quin Nhon on the coast, “a miserable little fishing village” that had been turned into “one huge honky-tonk” after becoming the chief supply base for the northern part of the country. Flying in a jet because the Beechcraft he was due to take had crashed, he narrowly avoided death—“by about three feet”—as hurricane-force winds swept in off the sea. Looking back, Kissinger conceded that the decision to fly back to Saigon that evening had been “insane.”

The truth was that Vietnam had awakened the man of action long dormant inside the professor. Compared with deadly dull Cambridge, Vietnam was pulsating with an authentic if deadly energy. Compared with the longueurs of Harvard Yard, the American embassy offered both tragedy and farce. Why had Kissinger rushed back to Saigon anyway? For a dinner at Lodge’s with the wholly inconsequential Dutch, Korean and Italian ambassadors, an event enlivened only by the postprandial performance of one of Lodge’s aides, who “took the guitar and sang two songs which he had composed in Hue, which were extraordinarily witty but which were [also] extremely bitter, being an amalgam of optimistic reports submitted by Americans and coupled with newspaper headlines of what actually happened. These songs hit rather too close to home.”

Kissinger was beginning to understand what the press corps found so compelling about Saigon. He even suggested that he and the journalist Frances Fitzgerald “form a society for picaresque tales of Vietnam.” The war was in equal measures dangerous and exciting. But it was also a doomed venture.

In trying to “rebuild a political structure” in Vietnam, Kissinger concluded after returning home:

- **the United States was attempting the impossible.** “In Europe the transition from feudalism to the modern state took three centuries,” and that was without the additional complication of a “century of colonialism.”
- Second, the **United States was trying to do the impossible without any of the advantages of colonizers.** In his most recent visit, he had “found almost no one who knew about conditions in October 1965.” There was simply “no collective memory. ... New people start with great enthusiasm but little sophistication. By the time they learn their job it is time for them to leave.”
- Third, **pacification was an illusion:** “[I]n one province shown on our maps as 70% pacified I was told by our sector advisor ... that 80% of the population was subject to VC taxation.”

Five days after the South Vietnamese elections, an embassy official wrote excitedly from Saigon to tell Kissinger that this “most complicated political exercise ... [had] far exceeded my predictions.” Kissinger’s sardonic reply spoke volumes about how he really regarded the situation: *“I never had any doubt that the Vietnamese were capable of organizing complicated things. What I am not so sure about is whether they can organize simple things.”*