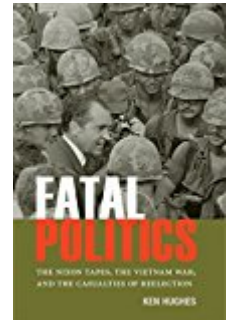


Ken Hughes. *Fatal Politics: The Nixon Tapes, the Vietnam War, and the Casualties of Reelection.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015. 288 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3802-8.



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Ken Hughes's 2015 book, *Fatal Politics: The Nixon Tapes, the Vietnam War, and the Casualties of Reelection*, combines the best of both American diplomatic history and American political history to explain the ways in which bringing the Vietnam War to a close affected domestic politics in a vicious circle. The author's use of the Nixon White House tapes between February 16, 1971 and July 12, 1973 provides the reader with a glimpse into the daily conversations held in the Oval Office as both President Richard Nixon and US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger developed strategies to bring the Vietnam War to a close while concurrently insuring that the president would win reelection in 1972. Their creation of the "decent interval" strategy all but guaranteed that South Vietnam would not fall to the Communists prior to the president being reelected to a second term. In sum, Hughes suggests that a closer examination of the Nixon White House tapes not only can reveal certain truths about key personalities but also better explain key decision points that brought about the conclusion of the Vietnam War.

This study begins with the premise that Nixon lived the rest of his days believing in the "stabbed-in-the-back" myth created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which suggested that both bureaucratic and political restraints had prevented the president from fully using the might of the military to win the war in Vietnam. Throughout the book, the author emphasizes the plethora of ways that Nixon bended both facts and historical memory to justify his many self-interested political motives in order to shape his political trajectory and, later, his administration's legacy. It is true that between 1971 and 1973, Nixon withdrew American troops from Vietnam, negotiated a settlement with North Vietnam, opened diplomatic negotiations with China, established detente with Russia, and won the 1972 election. However, the author argues that during this time Nixon and Kissinger misled the public about the Vietnam War in order to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam to the North Vietnamese Communists before insuring an electoral victory in 1972.

The tapes reveal that the administration's approach to the Vietnam War had both public and private narratives that conflicted with one another. For example, Nixon conveyed to the public a plan for the "Vietnamization" of the war whereby Americans would train the South Vietnamese Army to successfully assume command of daily operations so that he could fully withdraw the American military. He also shared with the public a plan to negotiate with the North that would guarantee free elections in the South after the Americans departed. Privately—revealed via the secret tapes—Nixon and Kissinger used these strategies to prolong the war in order to ensure Nixon's reelection victory. Vietnamization would prolong the war past 1972 because Americans would have to train the South Vietnamese to take over armed operations, while negotiations with the North meant very little for the survival of the South. The resulting "decent interval" strategy (emphasized first in Jeffrey Kimball's *Nixon's Vietnam War* [1998]) provided the appearance that the United States had both negotiated a successful settlement with Hanoi while handing off operations to the South Vietnamese. The interval of time between a full American withdrawal and the time in which the president had negotiated with the North to maintain a ceasefire before invading the South allowed Nixon enough time to convey to the American public that he had prevented the Communists from toppling Saigon, secured the release of American prisoners of war, and brought the era of American involvement in Southeast Asia to a close. This would allow him enough time to win reelection before the Hanoi assumed a southern thrust toward Saigon.

This is an excellent study that justifiably unites both political history and diplomatic history, a move that many foreign relations scholars have recently endorsed. Without understanding key domestic political issues, they argue, you cannot fully understand the decisions that US political leaders made in Vietnam and continue to make around the world today. Hughes argues that

Nixon manipulated the public by aligning their own interests in bringing the war to a close with his desire to win reelection. With the exception of, say, Ted Kennedy and Sargent Shriver, most members of Congress struggled to understand the ways in which Nixon continued to wage the war in Vietnam to the benefit of his reelection campaign. Members of Congress believed that the fervent anti-Communist Nixon would never allow the South to fall to the North no matter the financial investment or body count. Therefore, in 1972, they argued that a vote for Nixon was a vote for four more years of war. By embracing this view, as Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern and other liberals did, the opposition failed to understand just how Nixon used the war to his own political advantage.

Unfortunately, the author believes that the tapes exist as a holy grail for scholars of this period. Writing that their delayed release until 2013 prevented historians from accurately understanding the ways in which Nixon prolonged the war to win reelection, the author seems to believe that only by using these tapes can we truly see the truth behind Nixon and Kissinger's relationship, policy development, and their Vietnam War strategy. Whereas he successfully conveys the importance of uniting domestic political history with foreign policy decision making, he overlooks the importance of multi-archival research that incorporates the views of non-US countries. To say he nearly belittles other scholars who have a greater understanding of both the Hanoi and American perspective is to put it lightly. Although he avoids a deep historiographical discussion, he does spend a few pages toward the end of the book to highlight the importance of both the University of Virginia Miller Center's Presidential Recording Program and a select group of scholars who have worked on the decent-interval thesis. In these pages, he lashes out at scholars who express a more holistic understanding of the war, its many diplomatic consequences, and the role it played in the American political sphere. This contrarian ap-

proach is curious given that the author's focus is largely on only a few years time and only on decisions that made in the Oval Office. While briefly mentioning several diplomatic missions that negotiated the conclusion of the Vietnam War and the military operations that prolonged the conflict, the author relies almost exclusively on what he heard from the Oval Office to explain the end of the Vietnam War. I think I speak for many historians who would argue that this is a lop-sided view of this history regardless of how much the tapes may provide a window into the daily conversations between Nixon, Kissinger, and the White House staff. Multi-archival research can bolster what is heard on the White House tapes in ways that provide more nuanced explanations of this period in American history.

All in all, this is a really great read. To many, it will feel as if you are in the White House listening to both Nixon and Kissinger negotiate the end of the Vietnam War while pursuing political victory in the 1972 election. The author's narrative approach is supported by nearly fifty pages of footnotes, which do indicate a thorough analysis of tapes found at the Miller Center's Presidential Recording Program and papers located at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. As the author notes in the acknowledgments, the book was originally conceived as an e-book designed to link the text to the Miller Center's actual holdings so that readers could listen to the tapes. Despite the lack of clearly defined chapters, the book will surely interest broad audiences for many years to come.

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