



# Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century (Vietnam: America in the War Years)

By David F. Schmitz

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In *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War*, accomplished foreign relations historian David F. Shmitz provides students of US history and the Vietnam era with an up-to-date analysis of Nixon's Vietnam policy in a brief and accessible book that addresses the main controversies of the Nixon years. President Richard Nixon's first presidential term oversaw the definitive crucible of the Vietnam War. Nixon came into office seeking the kind of decisive victory that had eluded President Johnson, and went about expanding the war, overtly and covertly, in order to uphold a policy of "containment," protect America's credibility, and defy the left's antiwar movement at home. Tactically, politically, Nixon's moves made sense. However, by 1971 the president was forced to significantly de-escalate the American presence and seek a negotiated end to the war, which is now accepted as an American defeat, and a resounding failure of American foreign relations. Schmitz addresses the main controversies of Nixon's Vietnam strategy, and in so doing manages to trace back the ways in which this most calculating and perceptive politician wound up resigning from office a fraud and failure. Finally, the book seeks to place the impact of Nixon's policies and decisions in the larger context of post-World War II American society, and analyzes the full costs of the Vietnam War that the nation feels to this day.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Drawing on recently declassified documents and recordings from Nixon administration, historian Schmitz provides a revealing analysis of the 37th President's handling of the Vietnam War. Schmitz's findings illustrate that victory was imperative for Nixon, who didn't wish to become the only president to lose a war. With the objectives of containing communism, and preserving American credibility among the nations of the world, Nixon was willing to do anything to insure South Vietnam ended the war as an independent democracy, including carrying out covert missions and bombings, deceiving the American people, and even feigning insanity. Direct quotations from speeches, publications, and behind-closed-doors conversations are juxtaposed with the events that occurred at the time, providing a startling contrast that emphasizes just how often Nixon said one thing and did another. Schmitz concisely lays out Nixon's war strategy while pinpointing the controversial twists in the foreign policy from the years 1971 to 1973, and draws finely tuned conclusions about the larger impact on years to come. This strong, scholarly study will find its readership among both academics and American history buffs. (*Publishers Weekly*)

Schmitz has written extensively on US foreign relations, e.g. *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989*. His most recent book focuses on Richard Nixon's foreign policy with respect to the Vietnam War, especially Nixon's first three years in office (1969-71), noting that this period has received little attention in the historiography of the conflict. The author argues that during his first two years in office, Nixon attempted to achieve a conventional military victory on the battlefield to preserve US credibility and power. Contrary to what Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger argued, the administration never seriously attempted to extricate US forces from Vietnam and pursue détente until 1971, after it became apparent that military victory was unattainable. Schmitz chastises Nixon's militarily aggressive policy during the first part of his administration, since it needlessly prolonged the war and led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Americans and Vietnamese. Relying on a wealth of primary sources and newly declassified documents, he challenges the view of Nixon as a shrewd practitioner of international relations and argues that there never was any 'grand design for détente that guided all of his decisions.'

Summing Up: Recommended. All levels/libraries. (*CHOICE*)

Citing declassified documents to bolster his premise, Schmitz presents Richard Nixon as fighting not one but two failed Vietnam wars during his presidency. From 1969 to 1971, Nixon sought a military victory and a permanent noncommunist government in South Vietnam. From 1971 to 1973, he fought an increasingly desperate second war to achieve an honorable peace and to preserve his presidential reputation. He did so by means of bombings in Cambodia that were designed to scare North Vietnam into a treaty and by 'Vietnamization' of the war to buy time before his reelection. He and Henry Kissinger also cooked up the 'Madman Theory,' aiming to make Nixon seem unstable to North Vietnam and its allies so that they wouldn't provoke him. The communist government waited to sign a treaty until after Nixon's troop reductions meant the U.S. presence could no longer support South Vietnam's unpopular Thieu government or its forces. Schmitz concludes that ultimately Nixon's war left a bitter legacy: a demoralized and divided United States, a long economic recession, and the collapse of the 'American Century.' VERDICT This concise overview of Nixon's Vietnam diplomacy draws on and updates Jeffrey Kimball's *The Vietnam War Files*. It is a good choice for graduate courses and will interest informed readers and Vietnam-era scholars. (*Library Journal*)

David F. Schmitz's history of Richard M. Nixon's handling of the Vietnam War offers a distinctive perspective on the president's intentions regarding military victory. . . . Schmitz's rigorously researched work

richly adds to the scholarship on the Vietnam War. He redefines understanding of Nixon's policy making and offers new perspective on the internal dynamics of the Nixon White House. This short book is essential reading for informed scholars and students of the war and U.S. foreign policy making. (*Journal of American History*)

David F. Schmitz, a Whitman College history professor and U.S. foreign relations expert, bores into the first three years (1969-72) of Richard Nixon's presidency in *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century*, a concise examination and analysis of how Nixon ran the Vietnam War. In this well-written, well-researched, and well-argued book Schmitz makes a convincing case that Nixon—contrary to his public assertions at the time and after he resigned from the presidency—did not come to office to end the war by withdrawing American troops, but instead pursued what Schmitz terms 'escalation and victory.' (*The VVA Veteran*)

Scholarly and well documented, this short volume reconfirms the conventional wisdom that Nixon's stewardship of the final years of the Vietnam War was a costly failure. Schmitz's detailed examination of recently declassified government records from National Security Council files, including minutes, decision memoranda, oral histories, and memoirs of the key players, only strengthens Nixon's unfavorable legacy as a wartime commander-in-chief.... *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War* merits reading by students of foreign policy history. (*On Point: The Journal of Army History*)

In this important new book, David Schmitz deftly describes how Richard Nixon's 'victory strategy' evolved during his first two years as president, and details why that policy disintegrated in the wake of the failure to achieve a military victory, the administration's desire to focus on the wider Cold War, and the president's preoccupation with domestic political considerations. Based on impressive research in recently declassified documents and engagement with the vast secondary literature, this is a concise, insightful, and thought-provoking addition to the scholarship on Nixon and his role in the denouement of the U.S. experience in Vietnam. (Andrew L. Johns, Brigham Young University; author of *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War*)

Given the vast literature on Richard Nixon's handling of the Vietnam War, it seems unimaginable there is more to be said. Yet David Schmitz has much, much more to say. Indeed, in this meticulously researched and provocative account he delivers a devastating critique of Nixon's decision to pursue a military victory in Vietnam during his first two years in office. As Schmitz so clearly demonstrates, the turning point in the war that began with the 1968 Tet Offensive remained incomplete until the summer of 1970 when the ill-fated Cambodian invasion forced Nixon to finally abandon his quest for military victory. Schmitz proves that a new periodization of the war is called for, one that will undoubtedly change the way we think about Nixon and the last chapter of the Vietnam War saga. (Kathryn C. Statler, University of San Diego)

David Schmitz is one of the most discerning historians of U.S. foreign relations working today. Here he provides a concise and penetrating assessment of the Nixon administration's handling of the Vietnam War, with particular attention on the crucial—and comparatively understudied—1969-71 period. Schmitz argues compellingly that this phase of the war should be seen as distinct from what came before and what followed, and that Vietnam policy must be situated within the context of the broader Cold War. (Fredrik Logevall, Cornell University; author of *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*)

Despite the shelves of books written on the Vietnam War, historians have paid relatively little attention to Richard M. Nixon's all out efforts in his first two years as president to achieve a military victory. Based on a careful reading of newly available sources, David Schmitz's important book sharpens our view of President

Nixon, the chronology of the war, and the persistent influence of Cold War ideology. Schmitz shows how Nixon's over-reaching helped destroy the American Century. (Frank Costigliola, Editor of The Kennan Diaries)

#### About the Author

**David F. Schmitz**, the Robert Allen Skotheim Chair of History at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, is a renowned expert and author of 9 books on U.S. foreign relations.

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