

# Kissinger and Moral Judgment

*What role, if any, does moral judgment have in Henry Kissinger's approach to foreign policy? The editors of Worldview asked several prominent observers to answer this question on the basis of The White House Years, the first installment of Kissinger's memoirs. With an additional comment on the memoirs by David McLellan, here are their answers. — The Editors*

## First Among Watergate Accomplices

BY TRACY EARLY

Like Nixon, Kissinger uses the slippery phrase to sell the shoddy. "I believed in the moral significance of my adopted country," he writes, defending his zeal for Nixon's Vietnam policy. Do not all nations, all things human, possess "moral significance"? But Kissinger means to slip by another idea, a moral valuation of American power. "America, alone of the free countries," he continues, "was strong enough to assure global security against the forces of tyranny. Only America had both the power and the decency to inspire other peoples who struggled for identity, for progress and dignity." My!

Though Jewish in background, Kissinger expresses no commitment to the Hebraic religious tradition, or to any other. On the contrary, words from the religious sphere serve him as terms of disparagement. "we could not afford to have the talks break down over theological points." For Kissinger, ultimate value appears to reside in the kingdom of this world, especially the American. A moral action then becomes one that sustains or enhances American power; whatever would weaken it must be judged immoral.

Kissinger seems also to define tyranny and freedom in this fashion. The "free peoples" he repeatedly names as beneficiaries of Nixon's care are those whose governments support the United States; all else spells oppression. So Kissinger feels no awkwardness in self-congratulation on his service to "free peoples" while extolling the merits of various dictators. He even reports as a compliment that Mao and Chou, so recently the bloody Communist slavemasters of Red China but now allies against hegemony, said they preferred Nixon to the liberals. Anyone who supports American power merits applause, for American power defends free peoples, who are those with governments allied to America.

Stonewalling it, Kissinger still argues, page after repetitious page, that Nixon was right on prolongation of the war, the secret bombing of Cambodia, the 1970 invasion, on indeed his every decision regarding Indochina, though the futility of the whole enterprise now appears clear to most everyone else. Using more slippery phrases, such as "collapse of executive authority," he offers his alibi. But for Watergate it all would have worked. In his own behavior he regrets only that he momentarily let some people imagine he gave less than total support to Nixon's Christmas bombing.

"For a great power to abandon a small country to tyranny simply to obtain a respite from our own travail seemed to me—and still seems to me—profoundly immoral...." When that "small country" is ruled by a corrupt oligarchy, "a network of cliques held together by American subsidies" (as Frances Fitzgerald put it in *Fire in the Lake*), who's to talk of tyranny? But Kissinger's real justification for four more years of death and destruction was upholding American prestige elsewhere. Getting out with "honor" supposedly would impress the Soviets, show steadiness to China, prove reliability to allies in Europe, and reassure Israel. Kissinger's theories of linkage and geopolitics led him to assess actions in relation, not to the people most directly affected, but to power positions in a global chess game. He approached Indochina with little regard for the welfare of Indochinese, Iran with little regard for the feelings of Iranians, Africa with little regard for the interests of Africans.

Though Kissinger believes in the "moral significance" of America, he apparently sees none in the Founding Fathers' effort to prevent monarchical exercise of power. Resenting congressional and public interference, he helped Nixon deploy American power abroad, as though serving a shahanshah. He boasts of innumerable times and ways they kept Secretary of State Rogers in the dark, but fails to see that this carried implications beyond out-maneuvering a bureaucratic rival. Rogers was a presidential appointee, too, but one who had gone before the Senate for confirmation and remained publicly accountable. Kissinger was Nixon's instrument for personal and secret operations. Conventional wisdom holds that Kissinger emerged untainted from Watergate. However, if the term denotes not merely a third-rate burglary attempt but abuse of power, then he may have ranked first among Nixon's Watergate accomplices.

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# A Perverse Patriotism

BY RICHARD FALK

A representative comment by Henry Kissinger on the Vietnam experience captures the essence of what he means by moral judgment in *The White House Years*:

A people must not lose faith in itself; those who wallow in the imperfections of their society or turn them into an excuse for a nihilistic orgy by eroding all social and moral restraints eventually, in their pitiless assault on all beliefs, multiply suffering.

It is worth noticing the twists and turns of language here. When Kissinger writes that "A people must not lose faith in itself," he means "A people must not lose faith in its government." Further, the passage so read is only sensible, given Kissinger's other main ideas, if confined to the American people (or to the people of any friendly government). It surely isn't intended for the situation pertaining in such adversary societies as the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia.

Throughout these memoirs Kissinger reflects the view that the American performance in foreign policy, as enacted by its elected leaders, enjoys an almost inherent morality, thereby making its opponents immoral, if not worse. His venomous observations about the activist expression of antiwar sentiments in the Vietnam period express this outlook—"...egged on by a small minority expressing the inchoate rage of the 1960s with shock tactics of obscenity and violence, expressing their hatred for America, its 'system' and 'its evil.'" Kissinger believes "in the moral significance of my adopted country" and affirms its unique purpose in a typically abstract way as the assurance of "global security against the forces of tyranny." Such a moral conception of the American global role is underpinned, Kissinger informs us, by his childhood personal experience as a victim of Nazi persecution when he originally came to believe what "an inspiration" America "had been to the victims of persecution." Ironically, as policymaker par excellence for America, his role is characteristically to give aid and comfort, if not inspiration, to the victimizers rather than the victims. Kissinger never confronts the significance of siding in the Third World with the forces of order because the fate of Third World peoples is subordinated, without any rationale, to the globalist role of the U.S. as leader of the non-Communist sphere of international society.

Kissinger's intense patriotism is linked to an ambitious geopolitical role for the United States and to an antipathy toward populist tactics of dissent. His moral assessments are almost exclusively shaped by this dual orientation. Such a calculus seems awesomely deficient

as a moral foundation for foreign policy at this stage in national and world history. Indeed, what Kissinger specifies as "moral" strikes me as the essence of what I would call "amoral" (indifference as to consequences relating to human suffering and exploitation), or even "immoral" (deliberate willingness to inflict suffering on the weak and innocent for the sake of abstract geopolitical interests of benefit to the strong and privileged).

In foreign policy, aside from seeking to avoid war, various strands constitute an acceptable morality:

▶ a determination to treat human beings as *ends* rather than *means*;

▶ an attentiveness to the concrete circumstances, motivations, and voices of those who are *poor* or *otherwise oppressed*;

▶ a wariness of *violence*, of *military approaches*, of claims from individuals enjoying *excess privilege*, of prideful assurance by the *rich and powerful*.

One searches in vain through the 1,476 pages of the memoirs for significant indication of moral sensitivity in any of *these* senses. When Kissinger writes toward the end of *White House Years* about his feelings on January 23, 1973, when Nixon's speech brought the American involvement in Vietnam to an end, he thinks only of the American casualties. He makes no mention of the suffering or devastation inflicted on the peoples of Indochina. True, in defending himself against charges surrounding the 1972 Christmas bombing, Kissinger takes some care to argue that the impact of the B-52 raids on Vietnamese civilians was not as great as critics alleged, but only out of concern for the besmirching of his image by the media. His justification for the bombing on that occasion, as with all his justifications, has to do with abstract precepts, in this case making sure that both Hanoi and Saigon become convinced of American resolve. Similarly, when it comes to a geopolitically helpful ruler, the shah, Kissinger finds kind words, calling him "a gentle, even sentimental man who had schooled himself in the maxim that the ruler must be aloof and hard." He calls the shah "a dedicated reformer," while noting almost as an aside that there were also "darker sides," including "methods of repression unworthy of the enlightened goals." Even here, however, there is no sense that the Iranian people were being massively victimized by Pahlavi rule in a cruel way that could not be compensated by abstractions about being an ally or a modernizer. In reverse, predictably, is Kissinger's presentation of Salvador Allende, of whom he could see only the dark side, indicting him for his authoritarian designs even though the evidence suggests he perished, in part, because his commitment to democratic pluralism was so unswerving.

Kissinger, the supreme geopolitical amoralist, has invoked moral fervor in support of his interpretation of what it is best for the U.S. to be doing in the world. But this fervor is reducible to little more than a mystifying layer of justification added onto the prevailing American approach to power politics. It also has a domestic thrust that is antidemocratic, corresponding to the Trilateral Commission's warnings in *The Crisis of Democracy*. The elite foreign policy leadership is "immoral" only if it weakens its resolve out of deference to dissent-

# Perceptions of Morality

BY DAVID LITTLE

Religious News Service



For all the inspiration Henry Kissinger is supposed to have received from the tradition of "power politics" and "political realism," he does not, at least on the surface, employ the notion of morality in a way that is quite in keeping with that tradition. In *White House Years*, Kissinger displays little of the skepticism and embarrassment about mixing moral judgments and foreign policy decisions that is characteristic of political realists.

In the course of his narrative he indulges rather readily in moral evaluation. He refers to the need of every nation for a "moral compass," and he writes without reticence of the "moral significance" of his adopted country. He describes Soviet strategy as essentially "ruthless opportunism." He calls "profoundly immoral" any temptation the United States may have had to abandon abruptly South Vietnam, and he several times suggests the depths of his own moral anguish over U.S. policy in Indochina.

Still, there is something strangely incidental and disconnected about many of Kissinger's moral references, despite his own disclaimers. Kissinger contends that the major difference in the "perception of morality" between the statesman and the outsider is that the outsider has the luxury of thinking in absolute terms about right and wrong, whereas the statesman must make real-world adjustments and compromises. "He can rarely reach his goal except in stages; any partial step is inherently morally imperfect and yet morality cannot be approximated without it." Even if that is true, the statesman is still bound to justify carefully one step or stage as, at least, less imperfect or more proximate, according to his moral standards, than alternatives.

However, it is just that sort of careful comparison and discrete justification of policies, according to avowed moral standards, that is lacking in some prominent places in Kissinger's account. One example. According to Kissinger's own convictions, achieving a "decent settlement" in Indochina was of fundamental moral importance. A large portion of *White House Years* is dedicated to revealing the steps and stages by which this objective was sought. Basic to Kissinger's idea of a decent settlement was reasonable provision for the survival of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia independent of North Vietnamese domination. The credibility of U.S. commitments, and the "honor" and "dignity" of the United States as a key participant in creating a "new international order" all depended, Kissinger argues, on assuring such a settlement. On Kissinger's own terms, a key question is whether the Paris Peace Agreements of

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ers in the streets and "moral" to the extent that it perseveres in a course it deems correct in defiance of popular feelings. Underneath this "moral" code is a patrician assumption made quite explicit in *White House Years*: that bankers, corporate managers, and Wall Street lawyers, especially the ones with aristocratic credentials, are the best custodians of the national interest.

The moral deficiencies of Kissinger's orientation in foreign policy are magnified by the two greatest challenges facing the United States at this time: the danger of general war and the response to revolutionary nationalism in the Third World. His way of defining what is "right" is too statist for a nuclear age of growing interdependence and too imperialist for a historical epoch where non-Western peoples are increasingly capable of securing control over their political, economic, and cultural destinies. Besides, by condemning America to reactionary alignments with the forces of order throughout the world, he dishonors the noblest part of America's heritage: its association with the collective right of a people to struggle for independence, justice, and dignity against foreign domination and domestic oppression. Kissinger's contempt for such struggles is neatly disclosed by a comment he made recently while addressing a conference on NATO strategy: "As for Third World nations...when I was in office I never read their resolutions, I regret to tell you, which is just as well, because I might have said something rather nasty."

1973 amounted to the "least imperfect" course of action available to the United States in trying to achieve a decent settlement. Against those who claim that the same arrangement could have been attained in 1969, Kissinger responds: "Not even the slightest acquaintance with the record sustains that argument." Yet Kissinger's own account of the record lends support to it. "Analytically, it would have been better to offer [in fall, 1969] the most generous proposal imaginable—and then, if rejected, to seek to impose it militarily. Nothing short of this could have produced Soviet cooperation, for in the absence of crisis there was no incentive for a concrete Soviet step. (When a crisis finally developed in 1972, we induced some Soviet cooperation.) If we had offered at one dramatic moment all the concessions we eventually made in three years of war, and if the military actions we took with steadily declining forces over 1970, 1971, and 1972, in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam..., had been undertaken all together in early 1970, the war might well have been appreciably shortened—though it is hard to tell at this remove whether Saigon would have been ready to carry the burden of going it alone after settlement."

The most remarkable thing about this startling admission is its offhand quality. An earlier settlement would have saved untold lives, and would have terminated all the sooner the crushing psychic, economic, and political costs to the United States of continuing the war in Indochina. Yet Kissinger vaguely and casually cites "domestic turmoil" and the "divisions within the administration" as the sole reasons why "I did not fight for my theoretical analysis." There is not the slightest hint that Kissinger appreciates the moral price of neglecting this opportunity. He was not similarly subdued at other decisive points during the White House years. Why at that point? Why didn't he fight? Where is the detailed vindication for failing to pursue what on its face and by his own account appears a much less imperfect outcome than the one finally achieved in 1973 by the Nixon administration?

On evidence entirely internal to *White House Years*, we are entitled to some skepticism concerning the depths of Kissinger's moral judgment in shaping foreign policy.

## The Ironic Consequences of Conservatism

BY PAUL E. SIGMUND

In *The White House Years*, Henry Kissinger is, as ever, faithful to the conservative view of international relations he has espoused since his early study of Metternich. Yet, unlike Metternich, he is writing in a liberal democracy and must justify the survivalist ethic of balance-of-power *Realpolitik* in terms that give it what he calls at one point a "moral compass." What that consists

in is not explicitly enunciated, but presumably it is related to the "idealism...humanity...and the embodiment of men's hopes" that in an eloquent passage he describes as his image of America when he was a boy suffering persecution in Nazi Germany. It also seems to include the freedom of Americans from governmental interference, which in Kissinger's discussion of White House wiretapping he describes as "an even more fundamental national interest" than national security considerations.

Yet this commitment to idealism and freedom stops at the water's edge. In international politics, actions must be taken that are "inherently morally imperfect," and it is America's failure to recognize that in international relations geopolitical considerations must take precedence over idealism and legalism that has caused most of its difficulties in foreign policy.

How is this viewpoint applied to the foreign policy problem that dominates *The White House Years*—Vietnam? While Kissinger says that "to abandon a small country to tyranny" is "profoundly immoral," the real "moral compass" of his policy is described in the rest of the sentence: "and destructive to our efforts to build a new and ultimately more peaceful pattern of international relations." "Naive idealism" got us into Vietnam, but Kissinger says his Vietnam policy was aimed at permitting an American withdrawal, not under duress, but as "an American choice made with dignity and self respect" and without undermining the American people's "faith in itself." The initial commitment in Vietnam was an error committed by the liberal internationalists, but the pattern of U.S. withdrawal was to be determined by how domestic and world opinion would view American resolve, determination, and honor. Thus, when Kissinger later berates the Ivy League presidents who favored immediate withdrawal for being willing to "consign millions of South Vietnamese who had relied upon us to a Communist dictatorship," it seems evident that it is not the fate of the Vietnamese that concerns him but the impact of a hasty withdrawal on others who have relied on U.S. assurances of support.

The one place Kissinger appears to accept an international role for the U.S. in promoting democracy in other countries is also where his explanation is least convincing and his actions most immoral: Chile. Since the book ends with early 1973, it does not discuss the September, 1973, Chilean coup, but a full chapter is devoted to U.S. policy before and after the September, 1970, election of Salvador Allende. The chapter is necessary because the 1975 Senate Intelligence Committee investigations revealed the existence of a secret "Track II," after Allende's election, in which Kissinger and Nixon attempted to promote a military coup to prevent him from coming to power. The use of U.S. arms and money to induce the Chilean military to overthrow a democratic government after an indisputably honest and free election would seem to qualify as immoral by almost any definition of the word. Not by Kissinger's, however.

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Once again he blames the liberals—in this case the Latin American Bureau of the State Department—for creating the problem by their earlier unwillingness to give U.S. covert assistance to the conservative candidate, Jorge Alessandri. Kissinger defends his support of an anti-Allende coup with two arguments. The first, the impact of a Communist-dominated Chile on neighboring countries, is an application of the classic balance-of-power approach. As he said in June, 1970: "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people." More emphasis is placed, however, on an argument that sounds very strange coming from a conservative. A coup was necessary because Allende had been elected with only 36 per cent of the vote in a three-way race, and military intervention would be "a prelude to new elections," which would give Chileans the possibility of electing a president by an absolute majority. Never mind that the fanatic rightists with whom the CIA was in contact gave no indication that they would call elections—or that the Chilean constitution that the Kissinger-Nixon policy was bent on subverting called for a run-off vote in the Congress which would give one of the top two candidates a majority. (When the coup failed—but not before the Chilean army commander-in-chief was assassinated—Allende was elected by the Chilean Congress by a vote of 153-35.) One can only conclude that Kissinger is rewriting history in terms that will find support from precisely the American liberal internationalist idealism that he has consistently attacked.

The Kissinger view of morality in international relations—that is moral which enhances the security of the United States as a free society—is simple and clear. In World Wars I and II, however, during the Kennedy presidency, and again under Jimmy Carter, Americans have believed that U.S. foreign policy should represent more universal values. Liberal internationalism may involve a more complex and difficult policy process than the simple guidelines of Kissinger conservatism, but at least it avoids the result that Kissinger's own policies in Vietnam and Chile have produced: the loss of confidence, self-respect, and faith in America.

## One Man of Conscience, Perhaps

BY DAVID McLELLAN

The keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the Cincinnati World Affairs Council in March, 1972, was Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. The dinner was held in a cavernous banquet hall, with forty or fifty of Cincinnati's leading citizens seated in two tiers on a raised dais at one end. Midway through Laird's address a figure arose from the darkened audience and began working her way forward. Everyone, including Laird,

pretended to ignore her steady progress toward the speaker's lectern. Arriving directly in front of the secretary, the woman unfurled a small white sign—"War Is Murder"—and pinned it to the front of the lectern. Someone then got up and quietly escorted her to the sidelines. It was one person's way of protesting the ongoing agony of the Vietnam war.

As a foe of the war, I was relieved that nothing untoward had happened to the woman as she performed her solitary act of protest. Was not Laird just as culpable as his master Richard Nixon and his Faustian associate Henry Kissinger? Because he never broke publicly with Nixon, we have been unaware of Laird's quiet but persistent opposition to Nixon administration excesses during the Vietnam war. Improbable as it may seem, the only person to emerge from Kissinger's memoirs with his reputation enhanced is Melvin Laird. But perhaps it seems less improbable if we remember that Laird was one of the few professional politicians in the Nixon entourage, one with a political base in the Congress and in the House Appropriations Committee (where he had served for a dozen years). Laird is also a long-time elder of the First Presbyterian Church of Marshfield, Wisconsin. He is one of the very few people of whom Kissinger speaks with unfeigned respect.

Kissinger writes of Laird's aggressive bureaucratic style, of his devious efforts "to outsmart and outmaneuver anyone with whom his office brought him into contact." He also writes that Laird could be ignored by the president only at serious risk; Laird's base in Congress made him the only man in Nixon's cabinet who could safely challenge Nixon on an important issue. Not that Laird ever publicly challenged Nixon's policies, but Laird's opposition behind the scenes, however ineffectual, to some of Nixon's more irrational and dangerous proposals puts him in a class by himself. Kissinger admires Laird for preserving America's military strength and laying the foundations for its future expansion at a time when that policy was under fierce assault from critics in the Congress, the media, and academia. Since it was the indefensible prolongation of the war by Kissinger and Nixon that triggered the assault, we can legitimately honor Laird as one of the few high officials who sought to limit America's involvement as much as possible and bring the conflict to a rapid end.

Laird was a consistent and determined advocate of the speedy withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, not because he was a dove, but because he perceived the hopelessness of trying to defeat the VC/DRV forces and recognized the destructive inroads the war was making on U.S. military capabilities. Paradoxically, in his opposition to expanding the war he had to deal with the professional military, who still sought victory and backed every Nixon move to expand the war.

The first crisis in which Laird demonstrated his good sense involved the shooting down of an American reconnaissance aircraft off the coast of North Korea.

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Nixon's immediate reaction, shared by Kissinger, was that North Korean bases should be bombed in retaliation. Laird, joined by the Joint Chiefs and the State Department, successfully resisted a White House policy that they feared would only engage the U.S. in a second war at a time when America's military capabilities were already dangerously overextended. This was one of those occasions on which Laird discovered that intelligence flights by U.S. aircraft had multiplied over the years without a periodic review of their rationale or utility.

A year later Laird put up at least token opposition to Nixon's decision to launch a full-scale American incursion into the Parrot's Beak and Fishhook sectors of Cambodia. This was the incursion that was to convulse the country in connection with the deaths at Kent State. According to Kissinger, Laird had been the strongest advocate of shallow border-crossing operations, but he opposed General Abrams's initial recommendations that an incursion be made to destroy the sanctuaries altogether. If an all-out military incursion was to occur, writes Kissinger, "Laird wanted to make sure that no American ground personnel would enter Cambodia, not even air controllers...." Nixon, knowing the opposition he would confront from Laird and Rogers should he make clear his determination to invade Cambodia, arranged for a charade to be played out at meetings at which the decisions were being made. These meetings were treated as no more than briefings. Kissinger reports that Laird and Rogers "fell in with the charade that it was all a planning exercise and did not take a position."

Laird still did not believe that Nixon would seriously consider an incursion by American forces. "Nixon was immensely relieved [that the charade had not been challenged]. He construed silence as assent; at any rate [and all costs] he had managed to avoid controversy." As soon as the charade was over, Nixon instructed Kissinger to issue a directive authorizing the invasion by American forces. No wonder Kissinger comments that "The President's meeting with his senior cabinet officers did not lack a surrealistic quality."

Nevertheless Laird manifested his opposition both directly and indirectly. "He repeated his fear of high casualties; he implied that there had been a terrible misunderstanding about [General] Abrams recommendation...." Messages were sent to Ambassador Bunker and Abrams to insure that there was no misunderstanding that the U.S. field commanders favored simultaneous operations against both the Parrot's Beak and the Fishhook. General Abrams confirmed that both operations were regarded as necessary. "Laird restated his earlier position. He opposed the use of U.S. combat troops in Cambodia...." Unfortunately, Laird did not choose to resign or reveal publicly his opposition to an operation that had such disastrous repercussions.

Earlier, Laird had opposed the renewed bombing of North Vietnam; he did not oppose the initial limited bombing of the Cambodian sanctuaries, although "he did not think it possible to keep the bombing secret, on practical, not on moral, grounds." It is not evident from Kissinger's memoirs whether Laird favored the subsequent all-out bombing of Cambodia, since he was effec-

tively cut out of the chain of command on that decision.

By 1972 Laird's opposition to any lengthening of the war was intensified by the realization that congressional opposition to the war was beginning to focus on the Defense budget. Congressional pressure for a cut-off on military support for the war was becoming heavy. The successful North Vietnamese offensive of that April had cost the U.S. \$4-6 billion in reinforcements and ammo, costs that would come up for funding and review in the 1973 budget requests. The folly of the war's prolongation was now being manifested in outright congressional hostility toward the administration. As a former congressman, Laird was acutely sensitive to the disenchantment that had now come to infect the traditionally hawkish Senate and House Armed Services committees. Finally, Laird opposed the Christmas, 1972, bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong. It seemed to him that little if anything would be gained by the bombing, and it would once again open up the administration to criticism and charges of duplicity. Kissinger's "peace is at hand" statements had raised public expectations that would be costly to disappoint. The time had come to write finis to the U.S. involvement. Laird was not deceived by Kissinger and Nixon's last-minute machinations into believing that the chances of peace would be improved by yet another bombing campaign.

Why is Laird's record more sane and moderate than that of Kissinger and Nixon? Perhaps the former Wisconsin congressman was just a more levelheaded person or had more of a conscience. Unlike Kissinger, Laird also had a well-defined constituency and an established reputation with a peer group whose respect and support he could count on. His personal ego needs and ambitions were apparently more restrained and tempered than Kissinger's. Finally, Laird was a seasoned politician whose experience in the House had given him a sense of proportion and accountability. Unlike Kissinger, Laird was not deluded by unrealistic geopolitical or academic abstractions. He was not convinced that America's credibility as a superpower would somehow disappear if it did not preserve the independence of South Vietnam. Laird knew a mistake when he saw it. Kissinger says it all when he writes that as "a finely seasoned politician Laird did not believe in fighting losing battles." 