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Who Was Fritz Kraemer? And Why We Should Care

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Who was Fritz Kraemer?



Whether Vietnam, Iraq, or now Afghanistan, wars come and go, but the real battle is a philosophic one between two sects of conservatives. In [*The Forty Years War: The Rise and Fall of the Neocons from Nixon to Obama*](#), authors Len Colodny and Tom Shachtman challenge readers to examine the role of a little-known Pentagon figure named Fritz G.A. Kraemer. Colodny and Shachtman argue that Kraemer was the leading intellectual behind what became known as the neo-conservative movement, witnessed by the fact that Kraemer influenced so many high-ranking conservative figures over the course of six decades.

What we see in *The Forty Years War* is that Vietnam split conservatives into two groups: those who sought reconciliation with America's adversaries (including not only North Vietnam, but also the Soviet Union and China), and those who thought weak-kneed political leaders were giving away too much to America's adversaries, including restricting military solutions in Vietnam and more generally pursuing policies of détente. Following Vietnam, Henry Kissinger emerged as the best example of a member of the former group, while Fritz Kraemer continued to lead the latter group.



The split occurred during the fall of 1972, at the moment the Nixon administration was closest to reaching a peace agreement with North and South Vietnam. Most importantly, the split was captured on the Nixon

taping system. Before publication of *The Forty Years War*, no attention had been paid to a meeting that took place on October 24, 1972, yet it has all the makings of pure intrigue. At 11:15 am, Henry Kissinger and his long-time mentor, Fritz Kraemer, entered the Oval Office for a private meeting with President Nixon.

To interested observers and professional historians alike, the meeting raises far more questions than it answers. Management guru Peter Drucker referred to Kraemer as "the man who discovered Kissinger." Donald Rumsfeld referred to Kraemer as "the keeper of the flame", and [during a speech upon his departure from the Pentagon in 2006, he cited Kraemer's controversial philosophy of "provocative weakness."](#) Kissinger himself referred to Kraemer in [an emotional eulogy](#) as "the greatest single influence of my formative years." In 2000, Alexander Haig told James Rosen, author of [The Strong Man: John Mitchell and the Secrets of Watergate](#), that Fritz Kraemer "detests Henry today, even though he was Henry's father in the United States." National Security Council Staff Member Roger Morris stated that it was "probably Kraemer in the Pentagon" who was responsible for Haig's appointment as Kissinger's deputy. After all, neither Nixon nor Kissinger knew Haig previously; however, Kraemer naturally had the ear of Kissinger.

The role of Fritz Kraemer on Henry Kissinger's formative years

He [Kraemer] brought him [Kissinger] down to Harvard, nurtured him, loved him dearly, but became profoundly disappointed on the issue of Vietnam, and arms control, and other things. Because he happens to be a dear friend of mine, and I love him and respect him dearly. And I'm trying to get the two back together, and there's just no way; it's never going to happen. Because Fritz is an ideologue and a principled individual who'd never compromise on his beliefs.

Alexander M. Haig, Jr.

The obvious question, then, is why don't we know more about this shadowy Pentagon figure who seemingly influenced nearly every conservative foreign policy thinker from the Nixon administration forward? Even his death, in 2003, has been no impediment to his influence. Former Vice President Dick Cheney's recent criticism of President's Obama's Afghanistan policy could have come from Kraemer himself.

Start with what we do know. On September 18, 1971, in an Oval Office conversation between Henry Kissinger and President Nixon, Kissinger reminded Nixon that Kraemer had been sending a series of papers related to his theory of "provocative weakness" to the White House, to Henry Kissinger's attention. Kraemer's "provocative weakness" applied to Nixon's foreign policy in the broadest possible sense, including subjects such as Vietnam, China, and detente with the Soviet Union. In the excerpt below, Nixon clearly recalls Kraemer, and asks Kissinger to set up a meeting so that Nixon could meet with Kraemer himself.

Excerpt from September 18, 1971 (mp3, 0:22, 352k)

Kissinger: I have this friend, this right-wing friend in the Pentagon, I've shown you some memos of his—Kraemer—

Nixon: [Unclear]?

Kissinger: Kraemer.

Nixon: Kraemer. Yeah.

Kissinger: Who, when he was—

Nixon: He always was the one who sent in—who gives us the analysis—

Kissinger: Yeah, well—

Nixon: I like him.

Kissinger: He was giving me—
Nixon: I should meet him sometime.
Kissinger: Well, I'll bring him in if you want—
Nixon: You bring him in. All right, go ahead.
Kissinger: Well—
Nixon: Tell him that I do read his stuff, though.
Kissinger: I—Yeah, I will tell him that.
Nixon: Good.

Fritz Kraemer's theory of provocative weakness, greatly simplified, goes like this: displaying too much force, such as engaging in an arms race or using excessive force during wartime, are provocative but necessary actions in the face of an irrational adversary. Such displays of strength are preferable to appearing too weak in the eyes of your adversary, which is also provocative since such weakness may incite an adversary to take unnecessarily risky actions that they would otherwise not take. Colodny and Shachtman argue that this philosophy has been an overriding principle of the neo-conservative movement, which has been applied to a variety of international conflicts over the past 40 years.

Fritz Kraemer was placed on President Nixon's [schedule, on October 24, 1972, at 11:15 am](#). Kissinger's deputy, General Alexander M. Haig, Jr., who remained loyal to Kraemer after the Kraemer-Kissinger split, was not permitted to attend. At the start of the meeting, White House Photographer Ollie Atkins captured numerous images, which appear below. They depict Nixon and Kissinger in a jocular mood, clearly enjoying themselves, while Kraemer looked grave, perhaps annoyed that the start of his meeting had been reduced to humor and grandstanding.



During the meeting, Kraemer made it increasingly clear that he was not happy with Nixon's foreign policy, specifically with respect to Vietnam. Kraemer believed that the forthcoming peace agreement had been negotiated according to political timing, as opposed to sound negotiating principles.

Conversation	Date	Time	Participants	Summary	Audio
OVAl 806-009	10/24/1972	11:15 - 11:45 am	P, HAK, FGAK	pdf (23k)	mp3 (28.2m)

Nixon began the meeting by flattering Kraemer. "There are so few people with intellectual capabilities who aren't hopelessly unrealistic. We call them doves, for lack of a better name for it. That's too good of a name for it. They're actually worse. To have an intelligent appraisal by someone who really understands great forces at work in the world...with the Soviets, China, etc., to have that kind of analysis...I appreciate it. It's been very helpful."

Kraemer soon began to lay into Nixon's and Kissinger's strategy in Vietnam, including that crucial concessions had been made—such as not insisting on a North Vietnamese withdrawal from South Vietnam—in order to obtain a flawed peace in time for the 1972 presidential election. Kissinger and Nixon defended themselves.

[Excerpt from October 24, 1972](#) (mp3, 2:27, 2.3m)

Kissinger: Our difficulty, Kraemer, has been not that we have made concessions before the election. Our difficulty has been to think up demands which could protract it beyond the election because every demand we make—

Nixon: They settle.

Kissinger: They meet within twenty-four hours. So we are literally running out of proposals we can make to them.

Nixon: Yeah.

Kraemer: Make a proposal that they should withdraw from South Vietnam.

Kissinger: We've made that now. We've made the proposal, for example, that their prisoners have to stay in South Vietnamese jails.

Nixon: Forty thousand.

Kissinger: Forty thousand political prisoners would stay in South Vietnamese jails, which we thought was unacceptable.

Kraemer: That's interesting.

Kissinger: And they have now accepted that their cadres stay in South Vietnamese jails. Now, you know that this is not an easy thing for them to sign a document in which they release our prisoners, [they] have to release South Vietnamese military prisoners, but all [North Vietnamese] civilian prisoners stay in jail.

Kraemer: Do you perhaps think, that the ceasefire is such an advantage to them for the psychological reason that they are more disciplined, more homogeneous?

Nixon: I think they are fairly confident, but I think there is the other factor, which I think we must have in mind. Remember, we never want to obviously underestimate...that they have taken a hell of a beating. I mean the bombing has hurt, the mining has hurt, the attrition that has occurred in South Vietnam. I mean, when you stop to think of, not just what we have done in the North, but the 52s, those six carriers we've had out there, and everything. We have clobbered the bejeezus out of them. I think, therefore, that they have reached a point, and it is only temporary, I agree, where in their thought there, they may have read Mao. You know, he was always willing to retreat.

Kissinger: We may have been, in fact, too successful...because we told them, for example, that all communications will be cut off on November 7th. Because the president would have to retreat to reorganize the government.

This meeting was probably the only one to have occurred during the Nixon presidency in which Nixon and Kissinger permitted a rigorous debate, in the Oval Office no less, over the merits of not just Vietnam policy, but Nixon foreign policy more generally. Kraemer knew the issues well enough that both Nixon and Kissinger were forced to defend themselves to someone who represented an increasingly disenchanted sect of conservatives. Kraemer believed, as other conservatives did, that the conduct of Nixon foreign policy had become tainted by short-term political considerations, and that politicians had acted as a restraining influence on military leaders who believed they were capable of achieving a military victory.

[Excerpt from October 24, 1972](#) (mp3, 1:42, 1.6m)

Nixon: We've fought a pretty good fight up to this point, and we're not caving. Because we see that it's a very difficult war. Success or failure now, not just for the moment—because anything will look good for two or three months—but something that has a chance to survive, shall we say, for two or three years. That is very much a condition that we cannot compromise on.

Kraemer: May I formulate, say, one strategic sentence—

Nixon: Sure.

Kraemer: —that maybe summarizes...?

Nixon: Sure.

Kraemer: If, it should prove, within a number of fronts, that we, the United States, were not able to deal with the entity North Vietnam, 31 million inhabitants, that would be, apart from everything moral, the question will arise—among friend, foe, and entrants—with whom can the United States ever deal successfully? Because this entity of 31 million, supported by the Soviets, by China, but not by their manpower—

Nixon: Yeah.

Kraemer: —is relatively so small that everybody from Rio de Janeiro to Copenhagen, and from Hanoi to Moscow, can draw the conclusion: obviously, the enormous American power couldn't deal with this. Therefore, as a lawyer, I would say...since we cannot deal with Vietnam, with whom can we deal?

The tone of the conversation was not adversarial, but it was clearly elevated. Nixon admitted that Kraemer touched on far more than simply American policy towards Vietnam. "The whole foreign policy of the United States is on the line here," Nixon noted. The half-hour meeting was too brief for what Kraemer had in mind. He made his disagreement known to the president, which ultimately resulted in a split with Henry Kissinger. The estrangement that resulted between the two men, who had met a quarter century earlier after each enlisted in the U.S. Army during World War II, continued stubbornly even beyond Kraemer's death in 2003.

It is because these two conservative sects split—one led by Henry Kissinger and the pragmatists, and the other led by Fritz Kraemer and later figures such as Alexander Haig, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney—as well as the fact that they never resolved their differences before Kraemer's death, that this split continues today. Since Vietnam, wars and have come and gone, but this philosophic battle has never been overcome. Former Vice President Dick Cheney's criticism of President Obama's policy with respect to Afghanistan could have come from Fritz Kraemer himself. While many in the media have interpreted Cheney's comments on purely political, they miss the greater struggle taking place within the conservative camp. The debate over future American policy towards Afghanistan is merely the vehicle for the latest chapter in the epic struggle.

The Forty Years War should serve as a call to researchers to learn much more about Fritz Kraemer. Perhaps the outcome of this future research will confirm Colodny and Shachtman's view that Kraemer was a sort of ideological godfather to the neo-conservatives. After all, a split in the conservative camp indeed took place, and was never resolved. On the other hand, others may conclude that the emphasis on Kraemer is overdone. Either way, the first step is to learn more about the mysterious figure who was indeed influential to so many American diplomatic and military figures since Vietnam. For that, *The Forty Years War* indeed deserves credit.