

# 2011

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**Part II of H-Diplo Conference Review of *The American Experience in Southeast Asia, 1946-1975***, a conference organized by the U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, and held from 29-30 September 2010 in Washington, D.C.

<http://history.state.gov/conferences/2010-southeast-asia/videos-transcripts> .

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reports/PDF/AmericanExperience-SEAsia-Kimball.pdf>

Review by **Jeffrey P. Kimball**, Emeritus, Miami University

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**T**his conference was held in commemoration of the completion of more than two dozen FRUS volumes concerning Indochina from 1946 to 1975. Begun in 1971, the process culminated in 2010 with the publication of three volumes on the Richard Nixon-Gerald Ford phase of the U.S.-Vietnam War. Conference sessions included addresses by Hillary Rodham Clinton, Henry Kissinger, Richard Holbrooke, and John Negroponte; presentations by Ambassador Tran Van Tung and historian Nguyen Manh Ha on Hanoi's diplomacy and strategy; reflections by three "senior" historians on their encounters with and research on the war; reminiscences of several veteran news correspondents about their experiences in covering the war; and four "scholar panels" dealing with the U.S.-RVN alliance, the theme of force and diplomacy, counterinsurgency and reconstruction programs in South Vietnam, and the causes of and home-front reaction to U.S. intervention in Indochina. Most of the panels and papers focused on the 1961-1973 period. Methodological and topical perspectives ranged widely – from diplomatic, military, political, and social history to international history, modernization theory, transnational/non-state actors, and cultural constructivism.

Each of the 40-plus conference conveners, introducers, dignitaries, discussants, paper-givers, commentators, and audience questioners had something interesting and valuable to contribute to the history of the war. The online video presentations and textual transcripts are well-worth viewing and reading, each reinforcing the other in communicating information, meaning, nuance, and emotion. Without intending to slight other panels and participants, I found some addresses and papers more informative than others. Kissinger's address was of interest to me given my own research interests and considering that he was a key policymaker during the last phase of the American War, whose memoirs and speeches also shaped postwar historiography. Holbrooke's keynote was a fitting counterpoint to Kissinger's remarks, representing what might be considered an insider's dovish perspective, and it was doubly poignant because of his death less than three months later of complications from a

torn aorta. Panel 9 on force and diplomacy had interesting and contrasting comments by Harish Mehta, Stephen Morris, Stephen Randolph, and Robert McMahon, two of whom I think are mistaken and two with whom I mostly agree. I found David Elliott's remarks on the senior panel particularly pertinent and instructive. Some panels and presentations contained “fireworks” and are worth viewing irrespective of historiographic agreements or disagreements. Unable to summarize, review, do justice to, or even meaningfully characterize all of the presentations, however, I will direct my comments to select issues concerning the uses of history, since an underlying theme in the online presentations of former and current diplomats and in the topical subjects covered in the scholarly panels was that of the lessons to be derived from the history of the U.S. experience in the Vietnam War.

Secretary of State Clinton noted in her brief opening address that the war in Vietnam had “shaped the way” Americans of her “generation view the world and our country” and that the historical “lessons of that era continue to inform the decisions we make.” Unfortunately, she provided only one example, although it was an uplifting lesson: those who “refuse to search for common ground because the ground behind them is littered with the bodies and the blood of previous generations” remain hostage to their troubled history. She observed that “we have to face our past if we're going to make peace with it,” citing as an example the delayed but ultimately successful postwar reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam, which reached fruition during her husband's presidency.

In contrast, former secretary of state and national security advisor Henry Kissinger reprised his combative historical narrative of the Nixon administration's management of the war – a narrative that along with President Nixon's has greatly shaped the historiographic debate, as well as Americans' “memory” of how the war ended.<sup>1</sup> His major point was that domestic opponents of the war had made U.S. success in Vietnam impossible. The “moral” tone of antiwar criticism and the “civil war” conditions such criticism created in America, he maintained, prevented the administration from conducting “traditional foreign policy,” which he apparently understands to be Realpolitik coupled with military force. While he and President Nixon were compelled to seek a compromise peace, Kissinger continued, “Hanoi wanted victory.” Le Duc Tho refused to negotiate in good faith, he argued, until North Vietnam had brought about a “military change” in the balance of power. The history lesson Kissinger drew was that democracies cannot successfully prosecute wars when their citizenry is divided. “What went wrong in Vietnam,” he concluded, “we did to ourselves,” which roughly translates into the argument that critics of the war lost the war.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese speakers from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Ambassador Tung and Dr. Ha, Director of the Military History Institute in Hanoi, did not hesitate in affirming that Communist-led forces sought a position of strength on the military front that would assist them in bringing about a negotiated settlement that on balance favored them. After the compromise Paris agreement they continued to seek victory, which they won on the battlefield in 1975, enabling them to achieve their long-standing political goals of

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent summary, see J. P. Kimball, “The Vietnam War,” chapter 21 of *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon*, ed. Melvin Small (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 380-399.

national reunification and independence. Their official history is the story of a historically unprecedented and victorious struggle against a nuclear, military, and economic superpower, which was made possible because Communist leaders and the people of the nation drew upon Vietnam's historical experience of resistance against occupying invaders, enabling them in the historical circumstances of the mid-twentieth century to develop and implement successful military, political, and diplomatic strategies and tactics – although mistakes were made along the way. (Tung and Ha, like Clinton, celebrated postwar U.S.-SRV reconciliation, while Lien-Hang Nguyen of the University of Kentucky, who commented on the Vietnamese presentations, asked, “When will the [SRV] archives be opened?”)

There was little that was new or different in the presentations of Kissinger, Tung, and Ha compared to what SRV historians or Dr. Kissinger had previously said or written. But there appears to have been an important wrinkle in Kissinger's defense of administration policy when he responded to an unnamed questioner in the audience about whether he and Nixon had pursued a decent-interval exit strategy. Although he denied this was the case, he conceded several points: historical documentation confirms the administration made “statements” about the decent interval; the Paris settlement “was a precarious agreement”; the administration was “willing to abide by the outcome of . . . [a post-settlement] political contest”; and “we could not commit ourselves for all eternity to maintain a government against all conceivable contingencies.” He concluded saying, “so in that sense, the decent interval phrase has a meaning.” To be sure, Kissinger qualified these admissions, but he seems to have gone further than before in acknowledging something akin to a decent-interval strategy.

Contrary to another of Kissinger's claims, moreover, the documentary record, including that found in FRUS volumes, provides ample evidence that the Nixon administration did initially seek “victory” in the sense that in 1969 and into 1970, U.S. policy was to bring about military, political, and international conditions that would provide President Thieu with a “decent chance” of surviving into the indeterminate future following a diplomatic settlement that met U.S. terms. (By way of refuting Kissinger's remarks about victory in his conference presentation, John Prados of the National Security Archive quoted select passages from recent FRUS volumes.) As the war's circumstances changed by 1971, the administration's policy shifted to one of achieving a compromise diplomatic settlement that would at least provide the administration with the respite of a decent interval before the Saigon government's possible and likely fall. But recognizing the reality of military deadlock, both Washington and Hanoi made concessions in the Paris agreement of January 1973. With the terms it accepted, however, Washington realistically but secretly acknowledged the likelihood of Saigon's eventual downfall and thus U.S. policy defeat, while Hanoi and the southern guerrilla movement continued to seek victory – as did the Saigon government, whose pursuit of survival required an independent South Vietnam, a divided nation, and a victory for Saigon and the United States. (Paper-givers on panel 9 presented vying interpretations of the relationship of force and diplomacy to themes associated with the denouement of the war, without, however, mentioning the decent-interval policy.)

Aside from a denial, the major complaint Kissinger voiced concerning the decent-interval issue was against those who “in effect, say, 'You have to get out now. You were immoral ever

to get in.' But then you're accused of selling out when you say you are leaving, that you are fighting for the possibility of permitting the people of South Vietnam an opportunity.[sic]"<sup>2</sup> Kissinger omitted mention, however, of those others – like myself – whose argument is not that the Nixon White House sold out Saigon but simply that it did in fact follow a decent-interval exit strategy. Further, the administration kept the policy secret from others in government and from the American public, while misleadingly placing blame on critics of the war for Saigon's ultimate collapse.

Whether the decent-interval strategy was immoral or not depends on one's ethical frame of reference. If I must pass judgment on administration policy in my role as a historian, my preference is to use descriptive rather than emotive normative words and simply say that such a policy was dishonest – especially since the historical record indicates that during the war Nixon and Kissinger did not believe the war was militarily winnable. Withdrawal and a compromise settlement, were, as Nixon and Kissinger understood, realistically prudent and had also been recommended by key figures in the national security agencies and even some White House aides. Yet the surreptitious policy Nixon and Kissinger chose to accomplish the U.S. exodus – the decent interval – was politically self-serving, designed as it was mainly to protect Nixon from the wrath of the Right and preserve some measure of the credibility of America's will and ability to intervene militarily and covertly in support of allies and client governments.

In any case, criticism of the policy is less important to the historical record than the factual question of whether or not they had such a policy. We must first know what happened in history before we can pass judgment on it or learn lessons from it – not to mention explaining when, how, and why what happened happened. Besides, citizens of the nation have a right and a need to know why and how they fight wars.

Insofar as record-keeping and public access to those records are the quintessential building blocks of historical knowledge,<sup>3</sup> the mission statement of the National Archives and Records Administration is the clearest and most direct expression of the public's right to know and comes the closest of all government repositories to the Enlightenment view of the importance of historical understanding and the Jeffersonian version of such understanding in a democracy, which depends upon an informed citizenry.<sup>4</sup> It states that NARA “serves American

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<sup>2</sup> The transcription is incorrect. It reads “in effect, say, 'You have to get out now. You were immoral ever to get in.' But then you're accused of selling out when you say you are leaving, that you are fighting for the possibility of *committing* the people of South Vietnam an opportunity.”

<sup>3</sup> Amanda H. Podany illustrates this truism in *Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Never mind that Thomas Jefferson's understanding of the past was based in part on flawed historical knowledge overlaid with political bias; that is, he was conflicted about slavery, drew on sources about the past that were factually incorrect or incomplete, and he gave greater weight to Whiggish perspectives. See, e.g., H. Trevor Colbourn, “Thomas Jefferson's Use of the Past,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. 15:1 (January 1958): 56-70.

democracy by safeguarding and preserving the records of our Government, ensuring that the people can discover, use, and learn from this documentary heritage. We ensure continuing access to the essential documentation of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government. We support democracy, promote civic education, and facilitate historical understanding of our national experience.” Ironically, the Historian's Office of the State Department – whose FRUS volumes provide researchers and the public with comparatively easier access to government papers – does not apparently have a formal mission statement but explains on its Website that its FRUS “series presents the official documentary historical record of major U.S. foreign policy decisions and significant diplomatic activity,” in which “the editors choose documentation that illuminates policy formulation and major aspects and repercussions of its execution.” Implicitly, the use of the word “illuminate” by the Historian's Office might possibly be considered the equivalent of NARA's “facilitate historical understanding,” which suggests Jefferson's practical and democratic use of history.<sup>5</sup>

Even before postmodern, Counter-Enlightenment perspectives<sup>6</sup> came to dominate academic history and throw doubt on the epistemological, metaphysical, and ontological value of historical and especially official records, historians generally avoided drawing lessons, an exercise that for the most part was and is left to political scientists. Many reasons have been given – some by conference participants: lessons derived by either policymakers, the citizenry, or historians from past contexts often do not fit present contexts and are sometimes mutually incompatible (Holbrooke; Elliott); political and ideological bias yields distorted and selective lessons that are often misapplied “to meet the needs of the particular moment” or situation (Elliott). George Herring's observation about policymakers in particular was that

they use history in their own way for their own purposes. They remain, for the most part, grandly oblivious to the scholarship being produced in the academy. . . . Government agencies have a historical office. I know the one here at State the best. The Foreign Relations series is magnificently done, an indispensable source. But it's my impression that in-house historians are not consulted when there's a big decision underway and historical references are being used; nor are they likely to be in a position to challenge officials who make such statements. . . . Policymakers use history intuitively, select references that reinforce their predispositions or suit their purposes du jour. They might not even want to be bothered by history that emphasizes the nuances, the complexity, the ambiguity, the singularity of historical lessons, the perils of using such lessons in the first place.

Nonetheless, deriving lessons from the study of history and developing related empirically-based hypotheses and theories are useful and valid endeavors. Just the attempt itself can lead

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.archives.gov/about/info/mission.html>; and <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/about-frus>.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Zeev Sternhell, trans. by David Maisel, *The Anti-Enlightenment Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

to valuable historical explorations and improved information-gathering and analysis. What follows are a few lessons among many that occur to me after reading the conference presentations.

War is a serious matter. Don't start or enter into one if the nation's vital interests are not at stake and especially if the conditions of war-waging are so difficult as to make success unlikely, so that soldiers' and citizens' lives, the nation's economy, and other interests and ideals are imprudently and unwisely put at risk. In any event, such a war is likely to cause irreparable divisions within society incommensurate with potential gains. If there is political pressure to fight an unwise war, confront that pressure publicly and make an argument against it. Be wary of wars fought for abstract, ersatz goals, such as "credibility" and "reputation." On the other hand, if political leaders in good conscience and for good cause do enter such a difficult war, they should possess the strength of character and political courage to avoid deception, excessive secrecy, and war-fighting methods that violate the legal and ethical standards of the nation and international community – behaviors that in any case are likely to lead to "credibility gaps" and consequent loss of necessary public support at home and abroad. If such a war goes badly and becomes incapable of military resolution, decision-makers should seek an honest way out, even at their own political risk but in favor of their political/historical reputation and integrity, and in the interests of the nation. They should not be egotistically or politically tied to the defense of their initial mistakes, miscalculations, and flawed goals, which led them into a larger, quagmire war in the first place. Citizens and their leaders should also be prepared to recognize – based on the lessons of history – that while force can facilitate diplomacy, it can also, under other circumstances, undermine diplomacy while giving rise to reciprocal resistance and escalating futility.

There is much to learn also from the way the U.S.-Vietnam War ended. Washington's and Hanoi's reasons for agreeing to a settlement conformed to an age-old pattern for terminating deadlocked wars; namely, decision makers finally decide that a compromise armistice will better serve their reduced aims, offer more hope of achieving their goals in the long run, or at least lessen the heavy human, material, and political costs of continued war. Unfortunately in this case, it took too long for the belligerents to get to that point.

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