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Introduction by **Marc J. Selverstone**, University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs

In June 2008, the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs hosted a gathering of scholars, journalists, and military specialists to examine the politics of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. The event was designed primarily as an exercise in historical understanding but it also sought to weigh the implications of the Vietnam pullout for the drawdown then envisaged in Iraq. Papers and discussion focused on presidential decision-making, the role of Congress, the domestic political environment, geopolitical considerations, the media and public opinion, the military context, and the impact of the U.S. troop withdrawal on American political culture.

These papers have now been printed, in some cases in abbreviated form, in the June 2010 issue of the journal *Diplomatic History*. Beginning this week, H-Diplo will publish commentaries on these articles, many of which were written by scholars who critiqued the original papers at the Charlottesville conference. These reviewers include George Herring, Philip Zelikow, Randall Woods, Ralph Levering, and Charles Brower; they will be joined here by Ed Moise and David Kaiser. With the exception of a dinner address from Stanley Karnow, all of the conference proceedings, including a special conversation with veteran journalists Bernard Kalb and Robert Kaiser, can be viewed online at <http://millercenter.org/scripps/archive/conference/detail/3988>. As conference coordinator, I would like to express my appreciation to the Miller Center and its director, Gov. Gerald L. Baliles, for sponsoring the event and its associated festivities. I would also like to thank Bob Schulzinger, Tom Zeiler, and Doug Snyder of *Diplomatic History* for supporting the project and printing the articles, and Tom Maddux and Diane Labrosse for organizing the H-Diplo reviews and coordinating their publication.

Much of the conference focused on presidential decisionmaking, with four papers discussing the policies of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. In his keynote address, Robert McMahon analyzed the failure of the Nixon administration’s

strategy for negotiating the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam. According to McMahon, Nixon evinced “a stubborn refusal to accept that no degree of U.S. military pressure could alter the prevailing stalemate” in the war. Like President Lyndon B. Johnson before him, Nixon believed that Hanoi must have had a breaking point and that once he and his aides had established the appropriate level of coercive force, the Communists would sue for peace. As a result, Nixon remained wedded to the notion that a mutual and balanced reduction of forces was still possible even as it became clear that his administration was embarking upon unilateral reductions. George Herring will offer his thoughts on the McMahon article next week (7 June 2010).

I then opened the panel on presidential decision-making, examining plans formulated during the Kennedy administration to remove U.S. troops from Vietnam by 1965. Drawing on the secret White House tapes Kennedy made during his time in office, I argue that those plans are best understood as embodying a presidential aspiration — a desire not to commit combat troops to Vietnam and an eagerness to reduce the American footprint in Southeast Asia — rather than a policy set in stone. With the planning for withdrawal mirroring Kennedy’s approach to other federal and Defense Department programs, the troop reduction schedule came to resemble just one more administration initiative, and one that could evolve as circumstances dictated. Ken Hughes then refocused our attention on the latter stages of the war. Citing evidence from the White House tapes and the diary of Nixon chief of staff H.R. Haldeman, Hughes claims that Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry A. Kissinger keyed a U.S. troop withdrawal not only to the 1972 election but to the collapse of the South Vietnamese government after a “decent interval” had elapsed between the U.S. withdrawal and a final North Vietnamese victory. As Hughes writes, Nixon’s “secret timetable” for ending the war “served the political purpose of concealing Vietnamization’s failure long enough to render voters incapable of holding him accountable for it.” A review of the Hughes and Selverstone articles, provided by Ed Moise, will appear during the week of 14 June 2010.

Robert Jervis also looked at the Nixon years but set his sights on the broader dynamics associated with military withdrawal. After exploring the challenge of escaping from the “commitment trap”—the process by which a patron can become increasingly wedded to the survivability and viability of a client—Jervis turns to Vietnam. He addresses the oft-repeated claim that the terms of the 1973 peace agreement differed little from the settlement that Nixon might have had four years earlier. Jervis argues otherwise and claims that the passage of time provided the administration with significant geopolitical gains. In the end, though, Jervis faults Nixon for not making his strategy more fully known to leading Democrats, an approach, he argues, that might have yielded greater congressional support, and thus increased leverage, against Hanoi. Philip Zelikow will share his thoughts on Jervis’s piece during the week of 21 June 2010.

Jervis’s conclusion highlights the importance of legislative backing for presidential action, and two of the conference papers addressed the role that Congress played in the withdrawal process. Joseph Fry explores the efforts of two congressional committees—the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) and the Senate Armed Services Preparedness' Investigating Subcommittee (SPIS)—at stimulating public opposition to Johnson's policies. The respective chairmen of those committees, Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR) and Senator John Stennis (D-MS), were eager to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam but their prescriptions for doing so varied greatly. Fulbright called for a negotiated settlement, a solution that was anathema to most Americans, while Stennis criticized Johnson's embrace of a limited war. The failure of these committees to influence Johnson leads Fry to conclude that it is virtually impossible for Congress to impose on a president a policy to which the chief executive is strongly opposed. Julian Zelizer recognizes the difficulties that Fry outlines, but, in adopting a lengthier time horizon, he seeks to highlight a broader trajectory of congressional restraint on presidential action. Congress had sought to limit executive latitude at various points in the postwar era, Zelizer notes, but it was during the Nixon years that lawmakers had their greatest success. Zelizer ends his study by calling on scholars to explore the personal networks between Congress and the White House in an effort to understand the ways in which lawmakers have constrained the executive's prosecution of war. Randall Woods will offer his commentary on these articles during the week of 28 June 2010.

Papers from Melvin Small and Chester Pach assessed the impact of the media and public opinion on the politics of troop withdrawal. In seeking to draw lessons from the antiwarriors of the 1960s, Small places their record alongside the more recent drumbeat for withdrawal from Iraq. Numerous differences between the two wars, Small observes, led to the emergence of different antiwar movements. But members of both groups sought legislative and electoral means to achieve their ends. In sum, Small argues, antiwar protestors "can take solace in the fact that they may have placed enough pressure on President Bush to keep him from starting 'another Iraq,' perhaps in Iran." Chester Pach focuses on the Nixon years in his evaluation of the broadcast media and its relation to the withdrawal process. According to Pach, Nixon repeatedly criticized television journalists for downplaying the achievements of Vietnamization, for minimizing his own role in the policy's success, and even for hoping that the policy would fail. Yet Nixon's war against the press was misplaced, Pach argues, because the president fought a war on false premises. "Nixon's troubles had less to do with hostile news media," Pach writes, than with "the inherent difficulties of withdrawing from Vietnam and the problems with policies he devised to extract the United States from the war." Ralph Levering will reprise his conference commentary on these papers during the week of 5 July 2010.

Jeffrey Record then sought to answer the question of whether the very process of withdrawing American troops from Vietnam offered any lessons for the U.S. military as it proceeds with a drawdown of troops from Iraq. Before doing so, however, he warned of the inherent difficulties of deriving any such insight. "The presence of some parallels between the Iraq and Vietnam wars," Record notes, "should not obscure the fact that differences greatly outnumber similarities." While Vietnam provides no guidance on the pitfalls and possibilities inherent in an Iraq withdrawal, Record observes that both conflicts "underscore the American electorate's intolerance of protracted wars against

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enemies who fight in a manner that neutralizes the potential decisiveness of American's conventional military superiority." A review from Casey Brower will appear during the week of 12 July 2010.

Jeffrey Kimball and Mark Lawrence next turned our attention to the legacy of Vietnam and its impact on American political culture. Kimball explores two key narratives that circulated following the war—the “stab-in-the-back” myth and the “Vietnam Syndrome”—and pins responsibility for their creation and projection on Nixon himself. While a host of individuals and institutions perpetuated those narratives, it was Nixon who “embarked on a deliberate and proactive campaign to give form to the inchoate bitterness, disappointment, frustration, and social division over the war, consciously drawing upon this primordial cultural ooze to construct a coherent narrative of betrayal.” Nixon therefore “prevented Americans from coming to grips with their history,” Kimball writes, a charge that carries weighty implications for the tenor of domestic politics and the practice of foreign policy down to the present day. The impact of that legacy on contemporary affairs is precisely what Mark Lawrence seeks to explore. Lawrence notes that Americans have clung to the “lost victory” school of thought—the notion that the United States could have won the Vietnam War—even as scholars and have repeatedly challenged its tenets. More recently, the Vietnam War “was not so much reinterpreted as shoved to one side, an anomaly that did not need to be reinterpreted to fit the pattern because the pattern simply overwhelmed it.” Along with a triumphalist interpretation of the end of the Cold War, this rejection of Vietnam’s applicability to U.S. foreign policy, Lawrence argues, helped ease the Bush administration’s path toward war in Iraq. Commentary on the Lawrence and Kimball articles will be provided by David Kaiser and will appear during the week of 19 July 2010.

The richness of these papers and the discussions they provoked highlight several themes that became apparent to participants both during and after the conference. One involves the centrality of Defense Secretary Melvin Laird to the U.S. troop withdrawal and to the need for continued research into his role in the process. As panelists noted, Laird has been understudied and undervalued. With the publication of a recent Laird biography, the continuing declassification of national security documents, and the release of additional *FRUS* volumes, historians should be able to paint more nuanced pictures of Laird’s role as an architect of Vietnamization as well as the workings of the Nixon administration.¹

A second observation concerns the questions policymakers neglected to ask and the assumptions they failed to probe, a matter no less applicable to the war in Iraq than it was to Vietnam. What if Iraqis did not welcome Americans with flowers and open arms—what then of plans for occupation and rehabilitation? The questions policymakers might have posed during the Vietnam War were equally weighty: what if Hanoi did not have a

¹ Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison, Wisc., 2008).

breaking point, or at least one that the United States could establish within the costs and boundaries U.S. policymakers had established as acceptable? How might such knowledge have altered both the war-fighting and war-ending scenarios? As conference attendees observed, Democratic as well as Republican administrations transferred their own sense of rationality onto the North Vietnamese in an effort to calculate Hanoi's receptivity to risks and rewards. But participants found Nixon's case particularly startling, for Nixon clung to a belief in his ability to leverage Hanoi long after his inability to do so had become apparent. The persistence of that belief and our collective wonder at its durability suggests the need for further research into Nixon's assumptions and strategic approach, if not into his personality itself.

Nixon's failure to engage Congress during Vietnamization also highlights the potential benefits of closer executive-legislative relations during the course of troop withdrawal. A willingness to make Congress an equal partner in that process, which would have entailed a readiness on Nixon's part to deal more openly with the legislature, might well have forestalled the partisan recriminations that accompanied contemporary and retrospective analyses of the U.S. draw-down in Vietnam. As Jeffrey Kimball puts it, Nixon and Kissinger "failed to provide an honest accounting of their strategy of disengagement and the fateful compromises they had made at the negotiating table," thus denying to Americans the "psychological, political, and historical closure required to heal the wounds of national division." The prolonged timetable for withdrawal might have offered geopolitical benefits, as Robert Jervis argues, but Nixon's secretive approach to implementing it likely damaged his effectiveness in the bargaining process.

While the conference did not tackle the subject of withdrawal timetables per se, the Kennedy and Nixon experiences are at least suggestive of the impact such planning might have on allied and enemy behavior. In conjunction with a series of economic and political pressures, the announcement of a proposed Kennedy withdrawal may well have contributed to planning among South Vietnamese generals for a coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. Within weeks of the White House statement, Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, were murdered and their government toppled; the coup plotters themselves were driven from power three months later. By compounding the stresses then facing the Diem regime, the withdrawal announcement, arguably, helped to usher in a wave of political instability the South Vietnamese were never able to overcome.²

While the proposed Kennedy withdrawal may highlight the danger of declaring one's intentions too bluntly, America's actual withdrawal from Vietnam, under President Nixon, may be equally suggestive. Unlike the Kennedy plan, Nixon's schedule for troop withdrawal, which took place in piecemeal fashion, came with no publicly defined end-date (though the president did, apparently, operate according to a private one). On the one hand, therefore, Nixon was able to benefit from Vietnamization without the political

² See Ellen J. Hammer, *A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963* (New York, 1987), 237.

and geopolitical dangers of pursuing it according to an announced timetable. At the same time, North Vietnam and its Communist allies in the South saw the trajectory of U.S. involvement trending downward and were able to strategize accordingly; time, they knew, was on their side. Although a public timetable for a Nixon withdrawal might well have played out differently at home, in Southeast Asia, and with respect to the administration's broader strategic goals—and not necessarily for the better—the lack of one did little to alter the final result. Timetable or no timetable, the issue affecting allied and enemy perceptions seems to have been America's perceived commitment to the fight at hand, not any specific calendar for abandoning it.

That appreciation of American resolve may be one insight Vietnam offers as we consider the virtues and vices of current planning for a series of U.S. force reductions. American troops completed their pull-back from Iraqi cities on June 30, 2009, as stipulated in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Further withdrawals are scheduled to take place over the course of the next 18 months, as President Barack Obama has pledged to remove most U.S. forces from Iraq by August 31, 2010, and all of them by December 31, 2011.³ If the situation on the ground dictates a need for increased security, however, Iraqi and American policymakers may yet renegotiate the SOFA and postpone those departures.⁴ Indeed, if Obama does seek to revise the SOFA, he will have a chance to do what President Kennedy did not, which is to extend an American troop deployment beyond a publicly proposed end-date. He may well act with even more latitude in Afghanistan, as his target for commencing a U.S. troop withdrawal from that country—July 2011—comes with no deadline for completion.

Of course, it is impossible to know what the constellation of forces will be in the latter half of 2011 and what conditions Obama will face at home and abroad, much as it remains impossible to know how Kennedy would have responded to whatever circumstances he might have faced had he lived into 1964 and beyond. What is much more certain is that ongoing discussions about troop withdrawal, especially in the context of the 2012 presidential election season, will have a political component. The challenge facing policymakers, therefore, will be to convey an image of sustained but qualified U.S. support—whether material, rhetorical, or some combination of the two—while seeking to mold and preserve a domestic consensus on the requirements of American security. As history suggests, this will be no easy task.

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³ Peter Baker, "Obama Plans to End Combat Mission in Iraq by August 2010," *New York Times*, 27 February 2009.

⁴ Elisabeth Bumiller, "Troops to Stay Longer in Iraq as Support, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, 13 December 2008.

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of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He is the author of *Constructing the Monolith: The United States, Great Britain, and International Communism, 1945-1950* (Harvard, 2009), which won the 2010 Bernath Book Prize from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. He is currently working on *The Presidential Recordings of Lyndon B. Johnson, Digital Edition: Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War: Escalation, July 1964-July 1965* (University of Virginia Press, forthcoming) and *The Kennedy Withdrawal: Camelot and the American Commitment to Vietnam*, which is under contract with Harvard University Press. He received his Ph.D. from Ohio University.

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