

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Article Reviews

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No. 265b

Published on 7 June 2010

H-Diplo *Diplomatic History* Article Review Editors:

Tom Maddux and Diane N. Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Part II of an H-Diplo Article Review Forum on “Special Forum: The Politics of Troop Withdrawal,” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010).

Robert J. McMahon, “The Politics, and Geopolitics, of American Troop Withdrawals,” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 471-484.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/PDF/AR265a.pdf>

Review by **George C. Herring**, Professor Emeritus, University of Kentucky

This will not be the sort of comment usually rendered at professional meetings, a summary of the major points of the paper, along with a critique. Bob McMahon’s paper, as would be expected, is an excellent survey of a set of complex issues. Bob and I generally agree on the Vietnam War--and on the questions he covers in this paper.

Rather, what I will do here is amplify, elaborate, and highlight a few things I believe are important and raise some questions that seem worth considering.

The colonels and lieutenant colonels who command troops in the field will readily concede that a tactical retreat is the most difficult military operation to carry off. Perhaps even more so, in the diplomatic arena, a “retreat” after a failed intervention is extremely difficult to execute, especially in a democratic nation imbued with a powerful myth of its own invincibility. Vermont senator George Aiken’s proposal to declare victory and come home, although wildly impractical, had a certain appeal in its raw simplicity. It also paid homage to the essentiality in American political culture of finding a way to shroud the ignominy of failure with some kind of fig leaf of success.

As Aiken’s proposal suggests, the dilemma was painfully apparent in America’s war in Vietnam. As early as the summer of 1967, it was clear to many Americans that a vast commitment had produced no better than a stalemate. In the meantime, the war had divided the nation as nothing since its own civil war a century before. Many prominent Americans had concluded that the costs far exceeded any possible gains and that a war launched in part to promote U.S. security had in fact undermined the nation’s global position. Yet it would take six more years, many billions of dollars, and thousands of U.S.

lives—millions of Vietnamese—before the United States managed to extricate itself from the quagmire.

The essential dilemma was best expressed not by a policymaker or pundit but by an ordinary citizen in a trenchant response to a pollster's question: "I want to get out," she said, "but I don't want to give up." How to do this is presumably a central theme of this conference, and a central element of our nation's present quandary in Iraq. The issue of troop withdrawals is, of course, a fundamental part of that issue.

First, Lyndon Johnson. After the 1968 Tet Offensive, of course, LBJ instituted major changes of policy and withdrew from the presidential race. What is less clear is how he saw these admittedly dramatic steps ending the war on acceptable terms. McMahon suggests that LBJ grudgingly accepted the necessity of U.S. disengagement from Vietnam. He also notes that Johnson entertained vague hopes of a settlement based on the mutual withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam and the National Liberation Front and the Republic of Vietnam working out some kind of power-sharing arrangement. How this was going to be achieved, given the inflexibility on all sides is not at all clear. McMahon is more on target, I think, when he concludes that LBJ "clung stubbornly to the illusion that he could still salvage an honorable settlement of the war that he knew would forever define his presidency."

Throughout the agonizing summer of 1968 Johnson was a deeply divided, indeed a tormented, man. He continued to pursue the middle course he staked out earlier, but he seems to have leaned toward the hawks. He quashed various peace moves proposed by doves like chief Paris negotiator Averell Harriman and Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford. He agreed to the full bombing halt demanded by North Vietnam only at the eleventh hour and then mainly to salvage the faltering presidential campaign of Vice-President Hubert Humphrey (about which, we now know, he was decidedly ambivalent). He opposed the partial troop withdrawals urged by Clifford as a way of initiating mutual U.S./North Vietnamese pullouts, the first time since 1963, to my knowledge, that serious proposals for unilateral U.S. troop withdrawals entered the policy process.

On the other side, he insisted on keeping maximum military pressure on the enemy. Once the bombing of North Vietnam was halted, he drastically expanded the air war in Laos and South Vietnam. He ordered Gen. Creighton Abrams to "use the manpower and resources at your command to maximum effect." Follow the enemy "in relentless pursuit. Don't give them a moment's rest. Let the enemy feel the weight of everything you've got." He would not accept even the appearance of being the first American president to lose a war. The South Vietnamese, of course, blocked any substantive peace moves in late 1968, but given the approach taken by Johnson it is impossible to see how, even without their obstinacy, anything of real substance could have been negotiated in Paris.

Johnson's successor Richard Nixon's dilemma was even more difficult. I am no Nixon fan—never have been, and I think it's safe to say, never will be. But it is hard at least not to

sympathize with the impossible situation he inherited in January of 1969. The war was more deeply stalemated—and more destructive—than ever. The bloodiest year in Vietnam, Ron Spector reminds us, came after Tet. At home, the war had become, in William Safire's words, a "bone in the nation's throat."

In Nixon's first two-plus years, the question of troop withdrawals emerged as a front-burner issue. Domestic support for the war was crumbling. The withdrawal of U.S. troops -- perhaps more important, the reduction of U.S. casualties -- seemed an obvious means to deal with this increasingly urgent problem. As now with Iraq, Vietnam was also a huge drain on the nation's treasury and undermined its worldwide defense posture. Troop withdrawals could also help relieve these problems.

Secretary of Defense and former Wisconsin congressman Melvin Laird became the driving force behind removing troops from Vietnam. He was deeply committed, as he later put it, to "getting the hell out of there." He pressed the issue relentlessly --and effectively. It was he who institutionalized a policy of systematic, phased troop withdrawals. A veteran of sixteen years in the House of Representatives, Laird had sensitive political antenna. After going to the Pentagon, he maintained close ties with Congressional leaders. He believed Johnson's biggest mistake had been to Americanize the war. He understood that to maintain public support the administration must begin withdrawing U.S. forces from Vietnam and shifting the burden of military operations to the South Vietnamese. The United States would also drastically increase military aid to bolster South Vietnam's ability to defend itself, thus protecting the administration from charges of selling out an ally. Laird coined the word Vietnamization to describe the policy.

Laird was a skilled bureaucratic operative and a shrewd politician. Other key administration officials, the president included, had strong reservations about major troop withdrawals. A less savvy individual might not have accomplished so much. But Laird understood the game and played it well. He frequently outwitted national security adviser Henry Kissinger. He skillfully manipulated the president. He persuaded a reluctant Nixon in the spring of 1969 to institute the first small withdrawal. From that time, he used every opportunity--and every trick in the book--to push ahead. He sometimes announced publicly numbers Nixon had not agreed to, locking the president in and moving the process along. He accompanied each withdrawal with maximum publicity to make sure there could be no backtracking. The numbers fell from 536,000 in December 1968 to 415,000 in June 1970, to 157,000 in December 1971, and 47,000 by June 1972. Even when U.S. intelligence picked up the massing of North Vietnamese troops for the Easter Invasion, Laird used the domestic political imperatives of the approaching presidential election to persuade Nixon to continue to remove troops.

It is not exactly clear how he envisioned the endgame--if indeed he did. He seems to have recognized that military victory was impossible. The best outcome, he reasoned, was to get U.S. forces out, hope that South Vietnam could defend itself, and do everything

possible to ensure that outcome. He seems to have persuaded himself—despite abundant evidence to the contrary—that Vietnamization could work, was working, and indeed had worked. Hence his argument in the October 2005 issue of *Foreign Affairs* that Congress, by reducing aid to South Vietnam in 1973-1974, was responsible for its fall in 1975—the stab-in-the-back theory in spades.

Laird's unstinting – and successful -- pressure for troop withdrawals and Vietnamization bought some time on the home front. But it also highlighted Nixon's larger dilemma. A step deemed essential to address urgent domestic issues undermined the U.S. position in other areas.

Kissinger understandably protested that the withdrawal of U.S. forces weakened his hand in negotiating with the North Vietnamese. He warned of the addictive quality of troop withdrawals—like salted peanuts, he said in that oft-quoted memo. From the start, the United States had insisted on the mutual withdrawal of American *and* North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. How could it extract concessions from North Vietnam when it was unilaterally withdrawing its own forces? Not surprisingly, Kissinger stoutly—and unsuccessfully -- resisted Laird's proposals.

The military impact of U.S. troop withdrawals was also important, and from Abrams down the U.S. military command also resisted Laird's proposals. The United States after 1965 had assumed primary responsibility for the fighting. It had trained the Army of the Republic of Vietnam to fight as it did, even making it dependent on the United States, especially for logistics and air support. U.S. military leaders recognized that the ARVN was not ready to take over South Vietnam's defense. Real Vietnamization would take time, if indeed it could be achieved. The premature removal of U.S. forces could imperil the process. Americans wondered, as North Vietnamese negotiator Le Duc Tho once asked Kissinger, how, if the United States could not win with a half million of its own troops, it could expect to succeed with its “puppet troops” doing the fighting. It was a question, Kissinger admitted, that “also torments me.”

Ironically, top military commanders ultimately accepted the necessity of withdrawing U.S. forces mainly because of the rampant demoralization among those troops remaining in Vietnam. “I need to get this army home to save it,” Abrams confided to a friend.

The troop withdrawal policy further strained relations with a wary South Vietnam. Typically, the Saigon government was not consulted in decisions on and planning for Vietnamization. Although Nixon publicly proclaimed that Thieu had approved U.S. troop withdrawals, in fact he bitterly opposed them. The South Vietnamese protested what they saw as a political expedient for the United States. They found the very term Vietnamization demeaning, protesting that they had been fighting for years before the Americans became involved and even after 1965 had sacrificed the most. Some Vietnamese cynically dismissed Vietnamization as a “U.S. Dollar and Vietnamese Blood Sharing Plan.” Most saw it as a fig leaf to cover U.S. abandonment.

Nixon's challenge was thus to find ways to counter the diplomatic and military impact of measures taken to appease the war-weariness at home. Like Johnson, he refused to admit -- or could not see -- that the United States could not achieve a satisfactory settlement. He sought what he called peace with honor, which meant, at first, at least, the preservation of the Saigon government. He convinced himself that diplomatic pressure and escalation or the threat of escalation could compensate for the impact of troop withdrawals in the diplomatic and military arenas. The problem, of course, was that escalation of the war--or even the threat of escalation, should it be made public--could inhibit, or if actually tried, undo the value of troop withdrawals by provoking strong reactions at home.

This, of course, is precisely what happened. As McMahon points out, and as Jeffrey Kimball has elaborated, Nixon's first effort to end the war in the summer/fall of 1969 through what he called madman diplomacy--diplomatic pressure and military threats to be backed up if necessary by a major escalation--ended in retreat. The president abandoned the Duck Hook project for fear, as some of his advisers warned, it would provoke an uproar at home.

Nixon was not similarly deterred in the spring of 1970 by warnings from Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers. He ordered the invasion of Cambodia with U.S. troops. The result, as we all know and in many cases vividly remember, was far worse than Laird and Rogers had imagined, among other things, tightening the diplomatic deadlock with North Vietnam, reinvigorating the antiwar opposition, and provoking the first serious Congressional efforts to limit presidential warmaking power. So bad was the U.S. position by 1971 that Nixon and Kissinger abandoned altogether the idea of mutual troop withdrawals, conceding that North Vietnamese troops could remain in the South after a peace settlement. To their great frustration, Hanoi continued to hold out for the elimination of the Thieu government, precluding any settlement.

Ironically, what finally permitted Nixon and Kissinger to get a peace agreement, flawed as it was, was the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of spring 1972. This gamble to win the war by exploiting, as in 1968, the U.S. electoral calendar starkly exposed the limited progress of Vietnamization. The South Vietnamese fell back on all fronts. On the other hand, the overt action taken by North Vietnam enabled Nixon to justify strong countermeasures. His response was also more acceptable to the American public because by this time most U.S. ground troops were out of Vietnam. The Easter Offensive inflicted such heavy losses that Hanoi eventually felt compelled to settle. With an election approaching, the United States readily complied. The problem, of course, again manifesting the basic contradictions between domestic foreign policy and foreign foreign policy, was that the settlement took so long and came at such cost that neither the American public nor Congress had any stomach for giving Nixon even the limited means he sought to uphold it.

A common thread of McMahon's analysis is the inability or unwillingness of both Johnson

and Nixon to see or accept the hard reality of the situations they were in and act accordingly (he uses the word “stubborn” in dealing with both men). To be sure, as Yogi Berra famously said, it isn’t over ‘til it’s over. They did not have the hindsight we have today. Nor is there any magic formula for determining when it is over – until it’s over. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that they clung to illusions of success when so many signs pointed to failure. Perhaps a more secure leader, an Eisenhower, say, maybe even a Reagan, might have better adapted to the situation of 1968-1969. As we learn more and more about Johnson and Nixon, it seems to me that the nation was ill served by having in power at this particular time these particular types of personalities. And yet it also appears that the actions of the two men were peculiarly American, reflecting what the English writer years ago called the illusion of American omnipotence, the instinct, so much a part of the American character, that we can do anything we set our minds to; the difficult we do tomorrow, it is said, the impossible may take awhile.

The other thing that strikes me about Nixon is a pattern that repeats itself over and over in Vietnam back to the Truman/Eisenhower transition. Just as an outgoing administration has just about reached the end of its rope on Vietnam, a new one comes in, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, certain of its superior wisdom and confident that it could succeed where its predecessor had failed. “We will not make the same old mistakes,” Kissinger confidently observed in 1969, “we will make our own.” He was wrong of course. Confident that it could end the war in six months, the Nixon administration made the “same old mistakes” as well as its own.

In truth, of course, there was no easy way out of Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were not the least interested in helping the United States secure a face-saving exit. Opponents of the war at home offered few practical suggestions for extrication. The obvious lesson, as LBJ ruefully conceded -- before he escalated the war in 1965 is that it is a hell of a lot easier to get into a war than out of it.

As for the implications of all this for our present dilemma in Iraq, I will happily leave that to the panels that follow except to say that once again we seem to be reaching that point where we may have to bring the army home to save it.

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