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Reviewed by **Edwin E. Moise**, Clemson University

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

I’d like to thank Ed Moise for reviewing the articles that Ken Hughes and I wrote for this month’s issue of *Diplomatic History*. As coordinator of the conference from which these pieces emerged, I’m greatly appreciative of the time and energy he devoted to his critique, pushing Ken and I on various particulars and helping to spark discussion about these matters on H-Diplo.

Ken has already addressed Moise’s thoughts in his own response. As for mine, I take Moise’s general point about the need for greater rhetorical precision as good advice. While the October 1963 McNamara-Taylor Report as well as McNamara’s oral summary of it note that “the bulk of” U.S. forces were to be withdrawn by 1965, “virtually all of them” would *not* have left Vietnam by 1965, as I indicated they would. They were scheduled to do so, however, by 1968. According to the Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam (CPSVN), the planning document guiding the U.S. assistance effort, U.S. troops serving in Vietnam, which had risen to roughly 16,500 by the time of the McNamara-Taylor Report, were slated to drop to 5,900 for FY 1966 and then to 1,500 for FY 1968. This translates to a decrease of almost 90 percent by 1968 from the then peak figure of 1963. While one might quibble about the point at which “the bulk” of U.S. forces becomes “virtually all” of them, it’s safe to say that the vast majority of U.S. troops were to have left Vietnam even by the end of FY 1967, when only 1,600 were to have remained.¹

¹ *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 2: 179, Figure 2. This was the first iteration of the CPSVN, which was completed on 19 January 1963, and revised throughout the course of the year.

In terms of a general observation about these matters, it is worth noting that senior military officials seem to have interpreted the McNamara-Taylor Report according to the more expansive formulation I had used in my article. A description of the CPSVN, prepared for the November 1963 Honolulu conference of civilian and military officials by Brig. Gen. Victor H. Krulak, envisioned a “withdrawal of *all* U.S. special assistance units and personnel” by December 1965. An accompanying chart in the same packet of materials, detailing the phase-down of U.S. forces, envisioned only 382 members of MACV left at the end of FY 1966 and none by the end of FY 1967, with roughly 2,500 members of MAAG left by the end of FY 66 and 1,600 by the end of FY 69.² An additional paper outlining the transfer of U.S. military activities to the South Vietnamese indicates that “relatively few changes will be required in the current Comprehensive Plan to bring it into consonance with the decision of the Secretary of Defense regarding *end 1965 as the terminal date for our withdrawal.*”³ So while I agree with Moise that my language seemed to fix 1965 as the target date for a more or less complete U.S. withdrawal, contemporary evidence suggests that the American military presence in Vietnam was to have been comparatively negligible by 1966 and certainly by 1968. While my reference to a “deadline” stretched the explicit content of McNamara’s remarks captured on tape and in a memcon of the October 1963 meeting, it does seem to capture the understanding of at least one senior U.S. military official in the weeks thereafter. I would be eager to see evidence of other such officials rejecting that formulation during that same time frame.

And contemporary evidence is central to this matter. Like Moise, I find reason to question the significance of statements attributed retrospectively to Kennedy by White House aides, Defense Department officials, congressmen, and friends. My doubts surround not the veracity of those statements but Kennedy’s commitment to making good on them. Moise is correct in noting that I don’t “confront” this evidence, but I certainly refer to it in the text, citing in my notes oral testimony from Roswell Gilpatric, Kennedy’s deputy secretary of defense, and Roger Hilsman, who, by the time of the McNamara-Taylor Report, ran the State Department’s Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs. (p. 487, fn 3) Certainly one could refer to statements Kennedy reportedly made to Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, National Security Council staffer Mike Forrestal, or White House aide Dave Powers to similar effect. Space limitations seemed to suggest that the Gilpatric and Hilsman references would have sufficed. While a greater focus on Kennedy’s actions in Vietnam would have provided the broader context that Moise wanted, the point of my essay was to inject the presidential recordings into the evidentiary mix, and doing so with other contextual material not usually cited in discussions of this period.

As for Moise’s claim that I failed to notice that Kennedy was putting U.S. military personnel into combat, I think that’s a bit of a stretch. While I don’t provide specific numbers highlighting the growth of U.S. forces from 685 advisors in 1961 to over 16,000 by the end of Kennedy’s thousand days in office, I’m well aware of that escalation (as I imagine are

² Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities, 15 November 1963, JFKL, National Security Files, Countries, Box 204, Vietnam, Honolulu Briefing Book, 11/20/63, Part II. Emphasis added.

³ “The Transfer of U.S. Military Functions to Vietnamese Forces,” *ibid.* Emphasis added.

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readers of both *Diplomatic History* and H-Diplo), and I do allude to this expanded effort associated with Project Beef-Up (pp. 487-488). I'm also well aware that Kennedy was sending men to fight and die even if he himself thought he had preserved a firewall between the use of advisory forces and combat troops. Kennedy's insistence that there be no combat troops, as he understood the term, was consistent throughout his time in office. Even Lyndon Johnson seemed to recognize a qualitative difference between those forces fighting and dying in Vietnam up through early March 1965, and those that came thereafter.

Perhaps this matter of advisory versus combat troops and Kennedy's (and Johnson's) understanding of their differences might open up interesting lines of discussion on H-Diplo. Was Kennedy simply deluding himself—that these troops really were combat troops in the generally recognized sense of the term and that a deeper recognition of that reality might have forced him to grapple earlier and more concretely with the expanding U.S. commitment to Vietnam? Was his insistence on terming these forces “advisory” at least as if not more significant from a public relations perspective? Did his refusal to endow them with a more martial cast grant him greater political latitude, ultimately to the nation's detriment? Or was he generally correct in describing those 16,000 soldiers as members of an advisory corps—technically assisting, actually fighting, yet doing so not as self-contained American units but deployed with Vietnamese forces in the field? And how was that broader understanding of military advice and assistance—and the preservation of those images and that terminology—a reflection of Kennedy's and Johnson's strategy fighting for the brush-fire wars of an evolving Cold War?

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