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Marc J. Selverstone. “It’s a Date: Kennedy and the Timetable for a Vietnam Troop Withdrawal.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010), 485-495.

Ken Hughes. “Fatal Politics: Nixon’s Political Timetable for Withdrawing from Vietnam.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010), 497-506.

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

The administration of President John F. Kennedy drew up plans during 1962 and 1963 for a withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam, which would have been carried out mostly in 1964 and 1965. President Richard Nixon actually did withdraw American forces between 1969 and 1973. Nixon’s withdrawal was followed by Communist victory in Vietnam. Both Nixon’s actual withdrawal and Kennedy’s plan for one have inspired debate in recent years, over essentially the same question: was the president accepting a Communist victory when he planned an American withdrawal? Explicit discussion in the scholarly literature has come more from the side answering in the affirmative,¹ because the question seems more appropriate and more interesting to that side. Marc Selverstone and Ken Hughes bring valuable new evidence to these debates, found in taped conversations of both presidents that have recently become available. But they perhaps focus too much on those tapes. More attention to what the two presidents actually *did* would have provided useful context for the scholars’ analysis of what the presidents *said* when discussing their plans.

The most interesting new observation in Marc Selverstone’s essay on the Kennedy administration is that the documentary record shows Secretary of Defense Robert

¹ See for example Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) ; Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor as having been more enthusiastic about announcing withdrawal plans than President Kennedy was. Kennedy may have been privately urging McNamara on, but if so, he avoided leaving much evidence of this either in the documentary record or in his taped conversations.

The Kennedy administration was drawing up plans under which most American forces would depart Vietnam by 1965. The big question has long been, were these plans conditional on the war going well enough so the American forces would no longer be needed by 1965? Or did they represent a firm decision to abandon the struggle by a set date, even if this meant accepting defeat? Selverstone finds that Kennedy's conversations indicate his withdrawal plans were conditional on the war going well.

In one sense, Selverstone is not confronting the full range of evidence on the other side. The contemporary records of the Kennedy administration give a pretty clear picture of planning for a withdrawal that was conditional on the war going well. By far the best evidence that Kennedy had made a decision to withdraw even if the war went badly--to abandon Vietnam--was in the memories of a few of his associates, who said, years after his death, that they remembered his having told them that he had decided to abandon the war. This reviewer has never found these witnesses' testimony convincing; it is too difficult to reconcile their memories of Kennedy's thinking with the picture one gets from contemporary records. But Selverstone does not confront their evidence; he deals only with the evidence in contemporary sources, written or taped.

In another sense, Selverstone sometimes concedes too much to the scholars with whom he disagrees, using language suggesting a stronger commitment, to a more complete withdrawal, than was actually in the sources he is summarizing. Thus in his first paragraph he discusses a report by General Taylor and Secretary of Defense McNamara to the President, 2 October 1963, in which they wrote that "it should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel" from South Vietnam by the end of 1965.² The phrase "the bulk of" in this document becomes "virtually all" in Selverstone's summary of it (485). Selverstone usually refers to the 1965 date correctly as a schedule, but on one occasion calls it a "deadline" (491n20), a term often used by his opponents in this debate, and a serious exaggeration. A deadline is a date by which something will or must be done, not just a date by which it "should be possible" to do something.

More attention to what the United States was actually doing in Vietnam would have been desirable. Selverstone does notice that the American involvement in the war was deepening even while the plans were being drawn up to terminate it, though a bit more concrete detail would have made this clearer: the number of American military personnel

² Memorandum From the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor) and the Secretary of Defense (McNamara) to the President, 2 October 1963, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Volume IV, *Vietnam, August-December 1963* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), 338.

was about fifty percent larger when Kennedy died than it had been when the withdrawal planning began. But he does not appear to have noticed that Kennedy was putting Americans into combat, indeed he gives a clear impression that Kennedy had sent American military personnel only as advisers (485, 495).

Ken Hughes makes a credible case that Richard Nixon was not really committed to ensuring that South Vietnam would not fall to Communism after an American withdrawal, but was primarily concerned with ensuring that there be a “decent interval” adequate to insulate him from major political repercussions. Most important, South Vietnam could not be permitted to fall before Nixon had won reelection in 1972.

Hughes resists the temptation to cite only those of Nixon’s recorded conversations that support his case. Nixon spoke on both sides of this issue, and Hughes quotes him on both sides. He makes a good argument that the conversations in which Nixon seemed willing to accept the fall of South Vietnam were the ones in which he was expressing his real policy. One cannot say he has really proven this case, but he could not reasonably have been expected to provide enough evidence for real proof in an article of this length.

Hughes writes as if Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger delayed the American withdrawal considerably longer than they actually did. “[T]he president privately resolved more than a year before the election to bring the troops home between July 1972 and January 1973” (498). “If they had withdrawn the troops in 1971 or sooner, South Vietnam might have collapsed before the 1972 election” (503). This is misleading; Nixon *did* withdraw most of the troops in 1971 or sooner. Seventy-one percent of the Americans were out of South Vietnam by the end of 1971. Those who remained had almost no involvement in ground combat, and even American air operations were declining. The extent to which Americans had withdrawn from combat can be seen in the casualty levels. At the beginning of Nixon’s presidency, in the first half of 1969, Americans had been killed in action at a rate of a thousand per month. By the end of 1971, the number was less than twenty per month.³

If the large-scale withdrawals of 1971 were not mentioned frequently in the Nixon tapes, the omission seems so strange as to call for comment. Did Nixon not discuss with Kissinger the risk he was taking in 1971, pulling most Americans out of combat in Vietnam more than a year before the 1972 election? The 1971 pullout was almost, but not quite, followed by a South Vietnamese collapse in the second quarter of 1972, during the Communists’ Easter Offensive. Did Nixon and Kissinger ask themselves during that crisis whether they had pulled out too many troops, too soon? Did the results of the 1971 pullout need to come up later in 1972, when they were considering the implications of withdrawing the remaining Americans? If they did discuss this question, did they think

³ Raphael Littauer and Norman Uphoff, eds., *The Air War in Indochina*, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 270, 272. The rate of American combat deaths rebounded slightly in 1972, to an average of 25 per month, as a result of increased air operations.

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the glass had been half full (South Vietnam had not collapsed during the Easter Offensive) or half empty (South Vietnam had almost collapsed)?

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