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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Philip Zelikow**, University of Virginia

Author’s Response by **Robert Jervis**, Columbia University

I am glad that my article stimulated Phil Zelikow to write such a valuable comment -- really an article of its own. He insightfully combines scholarship and his government experiences in a way I find perceptive and enlightening. My own comments in response will be brief.

Even more that my article or the book by Douglas Macdonald on which I drew, Zelikow opens up the questions of the multiple ways in which different kinds of commitments to support others (mostly conditional versus unconditional) affect the bargaining relations between states. This strikes me as a rich vein for both political scientists and international historians to explore. The question comes up in many historical cases, and also confronts decision-makers as they both analyze the situations they are in and make their choices. I can only hope that colleagues will be intrigued enough to pursue these questions.

Similarly, I not only have no criticisms of Zelikow’s discussion of the interactions and trade-offs between domestic politics and foreign policy, but wish I had developed this line of argument myself. Again, the topic is crucial for both historians and political scientists, and while most of us are aware of it in the abstract, all too often we either treat the areas as separate or fail to delve deeply enough into the multiple ways in which they inter-relate. In the Vietnam case, Zelikow reminds us of an important fact that I do not think we fully understand: although the war was unpopular, the Democrats were blamed not only for getting into it, but also for pressing to get out. I think Zelikow is right that

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Vietnam has been an albatross around the Democrats' neck in a way that has influenced both domestic politics and foreign policy for the past forty years.

It is only in his discussion of the last part of my article that I have some disagreements with Zelikow, or at least with his interpretation of my article. I did not say, and did not mean to imply, that Nixon's slow withdrawal from Vietnam was, in the net, better than leaving quickly. Rather my claim was the more modest one that there were at least some gains from delay. I am inclined to believe that they were outweighed by the costs, but my reading of the historical literature is that most scholars simply ignore or deny that there were any gains at all, and it was this more extreme view I was seeking to rebut.

While I agree with Zelikow that the change that permitted the rapprochement with the PRC was on the Chinese side, I think the counterfactual of how Mao and his colleagues would have viewed the US had it withdrawn more quickly is difficult to determine. The Chinese wanted the US as a counterweight to the USSR: would a quick withdrawal have led them to see the US as less reliable and less valuable?

More importantly, a quick withdrawal presumably would have meant yielding to the North Vietnamese demand to overthrow the Thieu government. As I noted, it was not until the U.S. had thwarted the North's 1972 Easter offensive that this demand was dropped. One can argue that this hardly mattered because the agreement set the stage for a Northern invasion that would overthrow the government, but it is not only a matter of the length of time that intervened (the "decent interval"), but also of the identity of the hand that removed the South Vietnamese government from power. The reactions of others, and therefore the course of the subsequent history, might have been significantly less favorable had the US been forced to do it.

To repeat, I am not arguing that these gains outweighed the costs, or that Nixon and Kissinger delayed the withdrawal in the belief that doing so would permit the development of an international environment in which the American defeat would be less punishing. But what happened from 1969 to 1973 was not trivial.

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