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Robert Jervis. "The Politics of Troop Withdrawal: Salted Peanuts, the Commitment Trap, and Buying Time." *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 507-516.

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Review by **Philip Zelikow**, University of Virginia

Bob Jervis's article bundles two different essays in one package. The first essay discusses the first two clauses after his title's colon – "salted peanuts" and the "commitment trap" (about the challenge of simultaneously juggling the politics of the home front and the politics of the overseas partnership). The second half is about his third clause, "buying time," and its provocative argument that the slow withdrawal may have helped the U.S. get through a tough period in world history. But before turning to each, I will start with some general observations about the analogical reasoning that suffuses this roundtable of articles.

I. More cautions about analogies

The first essay in the article invites generalizations with frequent comparisons between Vietnam and Iraq. The "salted peanuts" metaphor implies that once withdrawals begin, the slide is irreversible. This is true, sometimes. In the second Iraq war, for example, troop strength was drawn down in 2003, then increased. It was drawn down again in 2005, then increased; then increased still more in 2007. The "commitment trap" metaphor implies that the U.S. becomes committed to its partner, which then weakens its leverage to influence the partner. Also a good point, sometimes. If scholars could reliably chart the degree of U.S. influence over Vietnamese or Iraqi policies – political, military, or economic – I believe they would find that the commitment trap was a valid point, sometimes. Sometimes not.

I suggest a conscious premise, that conclusions about Vietnam apply to Vietnam; conclusions about Iraq apply to Iraq. It is dangerous to assume that one will predict the

other. It is dangerous because the assumption about the past case so readily becomes a preconception or shortcut affecting the quality of thought about the case at hand. The historical analogies suggest possibilities and inspire better questions. They do not supply reliable predictions or trustworthy answers.

These are old warnings, often offered by my late colleagues Ernest May and Dick Neustadt. Bob Jervis knows them well. The influence of toxic analogizing on Vietnam decisions is well known; most studied is the bad influence of analogies to the 1930s. It is also important to note the significance of analogies to Korea. The supposed lessons of Korea suffused Vietnam decisions, especially in 1964 and 1965, at the edge of consciousness, surfacing in lots of different ways. This very much includes domestic politics, because the Democrats felt that the way they had handled the Korean War had led to political disaster for their party. Then there were all the analogies about the danger of Chinese intervention in Vietnam.

The Iraq war that began in 2003 was not like the Vietnam War. The Vietnam experience was rich with suggestive possibilities and good questions, in the nature of: Why don't we consider this option? Or, why not examine strategies that used to be in our toolkit, like these? But the answers to these questions, and the application of some old ideas, would be much different in an Iraqi context than they had been in Vietnam.

In government in 2005-2006, I was the Counselor of the State Department, a kind of deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, with some responsibility for Iraq. Having studied some of the staff work of the Vietnam War, analogies would constantly come to mind even though I did not think the two wars were actually very similar either in the character of the U.S. situation, the character of the enemy, or the character of the war – which was actually more like five or six different wars with different issues and combatants.

Particular ideas or concepts from the Vietnam era seemed suggestive. For example, when I originally drafted the "clear, hold, and build" catchphrase for a new strategy in September/October 2005 (it was first announced by Secretary Rice in her October 2005 Senate testimony on the war), I adapted some words and ideas out of the Vietnam literature. But the substantive content beneath the label was different. "Clear, hold, and build" was meant to encourage and encapsulate some ideas and best practices being proposed by various dissident officers at the time, exemplified to me by some practices being used in northwestern Iraq by the American and Iraqi units under the command of (then) Major General David Rodriguez (this included, but was not limited to, the well-known work of the regiment based in Tal Afar commanded by (then) Colonel H.R. McMaster). But what these folks were doing in northwest Iraq, or what General David Petraeus and General Ray Odierno later did with their joint security stations in Baghdad in 2007 and 2008, was quite different from, say, the standard procedures of a 1968 Marine combined action program in the I Corps sector of Vietnam. Using a common label like

"COIN strategy," implying the revival of kindred approaches to tackle comparable problems, can obscure more than it reveals about the detail of what was to be done.

Or, to give another illustration, in the late spring and early summer of 2006 I was quite frustrated in my Iraq work at State, in part because I had been trying for the previous eight months, without much success, to make "clear, hold, and build" something more than a phrase in a speech. I pulled out Bob Komer's famous 1973 monograph, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing," which he wrote at RAND after he came back from Vietnam. I sent annotated excerpts from Komer on to Secretary Rice and others because it seemed to me that folks were unconsciously replicating some depressingly familiar patterns of dysfunctional government performance. In that context it was useful to call attention to a suggestive past example. But once folks paid attention to the problem, the particular diagnosis would, like any resulting prescriptions, have to be based on close analysis of that situation.

The analogy then can serve as a kind of heuristic aid, a device to catch attention to possibilities or to another way of dissecting a problem, making certain ideas more "accessible," as cognitive researcher Daniel Kahneman might put it. The great danger is the temptation to think that the analogy has supplied a probable answer, a tempting shortcut that leaps over difficult, detailed analysis of the case at hand. For historians anxious to apply their knowledge to current events, bristling with analogical insights but having little access to detailed information about the current case, the temptation can be irresistible.

II. "Salted Peanuts" versus Political reputation

In his first essay, Jervis treats the U.S. domestic politics problem as a consequence of the war developments that produced a withdrawal move. Thus he makes the slippery slope argument that "salted peanuts" addiction to withdrawals is reinforced by the hypothesis that, if the government is discouraged, the public will even more quickly lose patience with a 'loser.'

I would like to restore more agency to the choices of the political party leaders. Beliefs among party leaders about their party's (and their personal) reputation may have been the most important single factor in gauging the politics of withdrawal during the Vietnam war.

Here again it is worth returning just for a moment to the Korean War experience. The reputation of the Democratic Party for national security had been badly damaged by the Korean War. The Democrats of the time knew it. A lot of effort in the Democratic Party, especially before and during the campaign of 1960, was put to the task of recovering its reputation for being competent stewards of national security. That background helps to understand why Kennedy and his allies were working so hard to run to Eisenhower's right on issues of national strength. These concerns also shadowed Johnson's decisions on

Vietnam in 1964 and 1965. For its part, the Republican party, whose leaders had been deeply ambivalent about overseas military commitments in the generation before 1953, had redefined its national security image in the 1950s and 1960s. Nixon had been part of that; he then, as president, had to confront that political and reputational burden.
The politics of withdrawal in Vietnam had a further effect on party political reputation that carries forward even to the present day. One might think the Democrats in 1976 expected to be honored by the American people as being good stewards of national security because they had helped get the US out of an unpopular war. Yet that hypothesis does not help much in explaining the politics of the 1976 election, and even less to explain the election of 1980. The reputation as "doves," strengthened by the Democratic party's leadership in ending U.S. involvement in Vietnam, did have an effect on the party. Political experts in that party do not regard the effect as having been positive, at least in national politics. Indeed, to this very day, the Democratic Party is laboring to free itself from the perceived burden of such a dovish reputation.

III. More on "Salted Peanuts": Reconciling Domestic Politics and "The Field"

In the first essay in his article, discussing "salted peanuts" withdrawal momentum and the quality of the overseas commitment, Jervis nicely introduces a kind of two-level game in managing a prolonged overseas commitment. There are two basic equations that the U.S. government is trying to solve in wartime. First is an equation of "What is my optimum strategy in the field?" And the second is, "What is my optimum strategy for domestic politics?" By "domestic politics," I do not just mean the domestic politics on the war itself, but the entire domestic political and policy agenda, which presidents always have in mind.

Jervis introduces the two-level game problem. Taking it further, let's consider which equation, "field" or "domestic," was supreme?

Since the politics of withdrawal is the flip side of the politics of escalation, it is useful to focus on pivot moments where both kinds of judgments were at issue. Aided by the work of several good historians, my reading is that in both the summer of 1965 and the autumn of 1969 Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon respectively came up with the optimal strategy for their domestic politics and domestic agenda. This was perceived at the time by shrewd observers of the domestic scene.

But both of those decisions turned out to be just about the worst possible strategic choices among available options to pursue in the field. Purely from a field perspective, or even from the point of view of U.S. strategic initiative and maneuverability in world politics more broadly, plausible arguments could have been made in both cases in favor of significant escalations of the war, overthrowing some of the parameters that constrained U.S. military action. And plausible arguments could have been made in both cases in favor of very rapidly drawing down the U.S. military commitment, especially if the U.S.

could have maneuvered the Vietnamese into pressuring the Americans to leave while the U.S. retained at least the appearance of departing as a voluntary and strategic choice.

The worst case, of course, was to be forced out without making a voluntary choice at all. In the 1965 and 1969 situations, the presidents maximized their domestic equation to come up with the perfect solution at the expense of the field equation.

How did they live with that? Francis Bator has argued intriguingly that LBJ understood what he had done in 1965, even understandably so given the ambition of his extraordinary domestic program, that then was very much in the air.[1] If LBJ did understand the Faustian bargain he had made, the problem of understanding how LBJ reckoned with this bargain would deepen once his domestic policy momentum stalled, especially after 1966, while the field strategy continued to produce predicted and predictable bloody stalemate.

For Nixon (Laird is a separate case that I don't understand as well), the awareness of the Faustian bargain is harder to see in 1969 and, given that his main agenda at home was one of public order, the bargain would be harder to defend except in more selfish political terms. A political psychologist, and Jervis is an expert in this field, might check for a combination of wishful thinking and cognitive dissonance. To his credit, Henry Kissinger saw the "field" dilemma accurately as he was losing his argument to Laird in 1969. He was flailing about it even then, with his Duck Hook and similar contingency plans that would carry the war more directly to North Vietnam.

I am not arguing, however, that the president will invariably prioritize his domestic political equation over the one in the field. Consider another war with Iraq, the war in 1990-91. Remember that the domestic politics of that war in the autumn of 1990 were actually worse for Bush 41 in 1990-91 than they were for Bush 43 in 2002. (Bush 41 eventually won his key congressional vote in the Senate by *five* votes, Bush 43 won his key congressional vote in the Senate by *fifty*.) In that much more difficult political environment, the elder Bush in October 1990 made a set of decisions to *double* the size of the American force he was going to send to the Middle East. He threw off constraints, confronted the extremely stiff domestic political headwind, and actually moved the whole Seventh Corps out of Germany to Kuwait. In other words, he did a 'surge' *before* the war. This move turned out to be critical for the way the war turned out. It is also worth observing that, by putting the "field" equation first and thereby producing a positive result in the field, Bush 41 also then received 90 percent domestic approval ratings (though he couldn't sustain them).

IV. More on "the Commitment Trap" and the problem of Conditionality

[1] See Francis Bator, "No Good Choices: LBJ and the Vietnam/Great Society Connection," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 32 no. 3 (June 2008): 309-340, 363-370.

Jervis thoughtfully opened up the subject of conditional versus unconditional commitments. He ably explains the vice of an unconditional commitment to *stay*, to keep U.S. forces in the foreign country.

But please also notice the vice of the unconditional commitment to *leave*, to withdraw forces no matter what. There are some real problems with that unconditional commitment if the U.S. government actually cares about influencing its poor hapless allies in the field who are fighting and dying. The allied government may genuinely care about millions of people who have a stake in the outcome of the fight, people who may be relying on the U.S., in some cases quite literally to save their lives and the lives of their children. American officials always have their lists of "do-betters." So the U.S. official goes to the allied official and says, "If you won't do better, I'm going to leave. And if you do better, I'm still going to leave." This does not seem like a very powerful theory of persuasion.

Jervis argues that unconditional withdrawal may work because the allied government will then have to face the requirements for self-reliance. That is well and good if self-reliance is a viable option. If the viability is certain, then no need for debate. What if it is not? What if, at best, the option is a bet with an uncertain outcome? Then the issue still comes back to whether the U.S. feels reasonably sure that it can afford to lose the wager.

If unconditional commitment is bad and unconditional withdrawal is intolerably problematical, how about the third option, a conditional approach? Jervis is right to spotlight the question and he is right again to point to the illustration of a "commitment trap" in Iraq, to which I can personally attest.

But part of the problem with conditional commitments that I think deserves a bit more emphasis than Jervis gives it, is the problem of political rigidity. The political rigidity arises in the domestic political equation. A president and his congressional allies must mass a great weight of public opinion either to support getting in, or to support getting out. It is extremely difficult to fine tune such collective political exertions and opinion-making. The forces in motion are so large, multifaceted, and coarse that even the cleverest president would find it difficult to manage or manipulate them with agility.

This contrast was evident in the election of 2008 between Barack Obama and John McCain. Obama represented a huge amount of commitment for getting out. McCain represented a huge resolve for commitment to stay the course. (Though Bush and Nouri-al-Maliki largely settled the issue shortly before Bush left office by signing the U.S.-Iraqi agreement for withdrawal of U.S. forces.) But the Iraq experience again illustrates the clash between optimal domestic strategies and optimal strategies in the field. In the field the optimal approach, clearly, is to wield conditionality. That flexibility may be constrained by the positions that the president and other leading politicians will have to take domestically on one or another side of the issue.

The problem may sometimes be solvable but it is very, very hard. Jervis has a nice insight about the advantage of domestic hostility great enough to endanger the commitment, but not quite great enough to destroy it. Thus the 'two-level game' might, just might, produce a balance so delicate that it strengthens leverage in the field! Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki did not want the 2007 "surge." For reasons of his own, he did not seem to be quite as troubled by the domestic violence as some Americans were. But it was perfectly obvious to him that the whole U.S. commitment to Iraq – which he did need -- was in jeopardy and his only lifeline to preserve it was to go along with Bush's new plan.

Another way to consider conditionality is to push the issue to a lower level of analysis in the field. For instance, in Iraq the conditionality claim was often posed, including in the Congressional efforts to impose benchmarks, as a crude on/off switch for general support. Yet as I wrote earlier, Iraq was not just one war; Iraq was at least five or six different wars, often with quite totally different sets of combatants involved and very different political dynamics. It was very much a war fought by field-grade officers at the brigade and the battalion level, if not the battalion and company level. The U.S. government could, in principle, dial conditionality right down to a particular Iraqi brigade, or a particular part of the Ministry of the Interior. Most of the Iraqi leaders and organizations were dependent on Americans for many necessities of life, such as physical protection, transport, and situation awareness, among other things. Some of these potentials for exploiting conditional commitment were realized effectively by U.S. officials and soldiers in the very hard fights of 2007 and early 2008. Those who have studied Vietnam may recognize some comparable illustrations from their own work on that topic.

But the bottom line with conditionality is that its wielder has to be willing to wield. The threat to withdraw support must be credible. There are costs to carrying out such threats. One rather interesting possible cost was this: What if the Iraqis get so aggravated with the fact that you're wielding a conditional commitment that they say, "Well, then, you should just go. We liked you when you were unconditionally committed. But if you're going to be so dictatorial, you should leave."

Quite a few Americans would have welcomed that reaction. Suppose, too, that the United States was obliged to leave because, say, the Iraqi government would not accept wise U.S. advice not to massacre civilians and commit other atrocities. In such a situation the politics of withdrawal can be entirely transformed, especially if the U.S. was sincerely willing to stay and help if the Iraqi government accepted the American advice.

Jervis has done a service by highlighting again, as Douglas Macdonald did earlier (cited in Jervis), the issue of the "commitment trap." To put it another way, there is a recurrent dilemma between bolstering flawed regimes or abandoning them. And of course the regimes are flawed. After all, if the regime were not flawed, it probably would not have needed so much outside help. So bolster it? Or abandon it?

Jervis helps us remember that, above all, try not to get trapped. Not as a historian, but as a policy analyst, he invites instead the question: "How does the United States retain maximum freedom of action in the world?"

V. Did the slow exit buy needed time?

In the second essay in his article, Jervis introduces the possibility that perhaps the Nixon administration, by buying time, delayed failure in Vietnam long enough to facilitate the progression and flowering of détente and the opening to China. Thus the slow exit may have achieved gains that offset some of the terrible costs of the continued American participation in the war. Jervis put forward an interesting and provocative argument. But I end up disagreeing with it; I believe the slow exit did not offset the costs, even based on information reasonably knowable at the time.

The chronology is important. It is important to form a net assessment of the consequences of U.S. foreign policy between 1969 and 1975. Start with the decisive year, the fundamental year for the Nixon administration's grand strategy in Vietnam, which was 1969. After the decisions made in that year, especially in the autumn of 1969, the administration had embarked fatefully on a road that locked them into cynicism at home and flailing to gain leverage in the field. For the remainder of his administration Nixon never could get off that road. Recall the Kissinger memo to Nixon that Jervis quotes, the one that warned about withdrawals being as addictive as "salted peanuts." That memo was sent on 10 September 1969. Kissinger reprinted that memo in his memoirs because he was rightly proud of the memo's prescience. The prognosis in that memo was very, very dark – and turned out to be dead right.

The major military alternative to slow defeat was a policy of strength: U.S. readiness to counter North Vietnam's invasion of the South with a direct counteroffensive against the North, quite possibly including the use of U.S. ground forces. The Johnson administration had ruled out that option in 1965. It had ruled it out, in large part, because the U.S. government was then deterred by a potent and credible threat of Chinese entry into the war – the threat of another Korea. By 1969 the circumstances had changed. China was vastly weaker in 1969; its forces in North Vietnam were mainly gone; and Beijing was increasingly estranged from a Hanoi that had sidled closer to Moscow. On the other hand, Nixon's domestic room for maneuver also was more constrained than Johnson's had been in 1965. Nevertheless I believe that the choices that Nixon and Laird made in the autumn of 1969 were probably the worst they could have made from an international perspective, and probably the best from the point of view only of short-term domestic politics.

To detail my concerns further: 1. Anyone can do the numbers on the foreseeable and actual human cost of the 1969 decisions. Spending time in military hospitals with the newly wounded can be a salutary, tangible reminder of what that cost really means – even more powerful than the crosses row on row. Putting aside personal opinions, historians

can properly examine how the responsible leaders reflected on or confronted the concrete human cost of their judgments.

2. If the concern was to ride out a dangerous moment in world history, the decisions of 1965 seem more defensible, based on what was known and knowable at the time, than the decisions of 1969. In that part of the world, the key danger of international politics was the perceived momentum of China, especially the momentum of China in southeast Asia. In 1964 and 1965, this was a very serious concern. It was seen as a very serious concern not only by the United States but by virtually every friendly leader in East and Southeast Asia. But by 1969 the concerns about Chinese revolutionary momentum had significantly abated. Why? Mainly because of the internal implosion of China as the revolutionary momentum turned inward into the upheavals of the "Cultural Revolution." The 1965 concerns about Chinese advances in southeast Asia had also been significantly mitigated by 1969. This was not just because of developments in Vietnam but also because of developments elsewhere in Southeast Asia, above all the 1965 revolution and anti-Chinese purge in Indonesia.

3. I do not think the slow exit bought time and space for Nixon's opening to China. That is because I do not think the key variable in the opening to China in 1971-1972 was determined in Washington. I think the key variable in the opening was Chinese. As I read the literature, U.S. officials were looking for an opening to China from the Johnson administration forward. The key variable was when the Chinese, i.e. Mao, would decide to move on their end. And the key variable for Mao and his few advisers was when they felt relatively complacent about the U.S. not being much of a threat, while the Soviets inspired more and more concern, especially by 1968-1969. If the U.S. had withdrawn earlier from Vietnam, perhaps that judgment would have been even clearer to the Chinese. On the other hand, if the U.S. had escalated in Vietnam, that would certainly have presented a different assessment. But even in that case the Chinese might have been ready, by 1969, to see the North Vietnamese (and their Soviet ally) get a comeuppance, so long as the U.S. took various steps to reassure China.

4. The slow exit did not help the international reputation or prestige of the United States. The record of Kissinger's diplomacy is one where he seems constantly to be trying to recover reputation, restore the tattered garment of American prestige, against the vastly corrosive effect of prolonged American frustration in the Vietnam war. He flails to gain at least the appearance of potency, to gain some room to maneuver, using diplomatic legerdemain in sheer activity to cover the lack of underlying assets. It is a heroic rearguard action, as the gloomy predictions Kissinger made in 1969 came true. At times the record of Kissinger's efforts remind me of Napoleon's campaign in northern France in 1814, the series of brilliant little actions as the emperor is falling, ever falling, back toward Paris.

There is a central point about that diplomatic record between 1969 and 1973: the dynamic of every one of those major negotiations was fixed, for the U.S., around the issue of

Vietnam. Of course the U.S. was not going to overthrow their South Vietnamese partner. The issue was whether the U.S. would keep fighting to save that partner. All the requests for North Vietnamese withdrawal from South Vietnam were simply requests for North Vietnam to quit the war, to quit attacking South Vietnam. It would not. Since the U.S. wouldn't quit either, Nixon and Kissinger were constantly doing everything they could to get others – Soviets, Chinese -- to help them persuade the North Vietnamese to quit, or at least lay off so America could get out gracefully. America constantly asked its rivals for help with America's Vietnam problem. The U.S. then made deals to facilitate that "help."

Vietnam thus became a huge asset in negotiations for the other side. Dobrynin played it for all it was worth. This was Soviet diplomacy at the height of its Cold War competence. They and the Chinese knew how to exploit the situation, extracting much for their "help" -- which then turned out to be evanescent.

5. Also notice the significance of the way the collapse in Vietnam finally happened, as a humiliating demonstration of U.S. weakness, and consider the effects of that collapse on the collapse of détente in the mid-1970s. Détente was unraveling fast even by 1974, both in the world and in U.S. domestic politics. The Soviet Union and its allies were emboldened; they pressed their advantages in various places. The net result was a rather dangerous period all over the world, stimulating counterreactions and leading to still more serious global dangers in the early 1980s.

In sum, the Jervis analysis turns on a counterfactual analysis of the period between 1969 and 1975, and its foreseeable consequences. He views this as a period in which the U.S. improved its international position, including its position in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, in comparison to the counterfactual hypothesis of rapid withdrawal à la de Gaulle/Algeria. I believe instead that, by continuing the war, the U.S. damaged its strength and cohesion at home, fed a dispiriting polarization of anti-American opinion in key allied countries, attached a constant distraction and liability to its military posture and Cold War diplomacy, and did not add to the Chinese calculus of when to distance itself from the Soviet Union and play the American card. I believe Nixon could have instead juiced up the direction he was already choosing with a 'Nixon Doctrine' that trumpeted U.S. strength in its central competition with the Soviet Union and public order at home. Or he could even have chosen escalation to win – the Kissinger option of 1969. Either way I think he could have found a different but still viable strategy to manage his 'two-level' game than the more narrowly gauged and cynical path he chose.

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