

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Article Reviews

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Joseph A. Fry. “To Negotiate or Bomb: Congressional Prescriptions for Withdrawing U.S. Troops from Vietnam.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 517-528.

Julian E. Zelizer. “Congress and the Politics of Troop Withdrawal.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 529-542.

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Review by **Randall Woods**, University of Arkansas

**M**y thanks to Marc Selverstone and the staff for putting on a wonderful conference at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs. If we’re not a gathering of eagles, we’re at least a gathering of owls.

One of my colleagues present here observed that since I’ve written biographies of both J. William Fulbright and Lyndon Johnson, that I was uniquely equipped to comment on this session; my wife has suggested that I be treated for schizophrenia.

These papers, although they come to somewhat different conclusions, demonstrate that—in contrast to the conventional wisdom of a growing, burgeoning presidency—that Congress has acted in many ways to restrain and constrain the conduct of American foreign policy. I think that in our obsession with presidents and individuals—the media’s obsession with individuals, the tendency to personify foreign policy—that we exaggerate the freedom of action that chief executives have; you’ve heard a recitation of some of those very real limitations. In my meanderings in the National Archives, I perused the recently opened Nixon-Vietnam country files. In their decisions regarding the Vietnam War, Nixon and Kissinger appeared to be supplicants to Melvin Laird, who was relentless in driving the military build-down there. Laird was not in Congress but he was of Congress. That was his constituency and his political base. In this sense, for students of Vietnamization, I think that Melvin Laird may deserve more attention than Henry Kissinger.

Today's panelists differ somewhat in their conclusions. I think that Andy Fry implies that the dovish Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the hawkish Senate Armed Services Committee canceled each other out, and they did to a certain extent. Johnson, who was great at mounting counterattacks, was not unhappy with the situation. In foreign policy particularly, he worked tirelessly to balance the right and the left. Julian Zelizer has made a clear case that Congress did matter, did make a difference. I agree. In my own work, I found that Bill Fulbright was crucial to the congressional anti-Vietnam war movement because he was both a segregationist and an internationalist. The headline of the review of the biography that appeared in the *Economist* read: "Evil Segregationist, Heroic Internationalist." That first part has gotten me in no small amount of trouble in my adopted state of Arkansas. But the anomalous combination existed, and it did uniquely equip him to put together a coalition. After he became disillusioned with the Nixon administration in '69, he was able to communicate with people like George McGovern and Frank Church on the one hand, and Sam Ervin, Richard Russell and John Stennis on the other. Fulbright had signed the Southern Manifesto, but he had been ardent opponent of the war since early 1966. Most important, he was able to unite southern segregationists and western liberals under the constitutional umbrella of strict constructionism. If southern senators could not oppose the war on substantive grounds, they could as good states-righters oppose the expansion of the imperial presidency. Circumscription of the power of the executive was as much a part of the mantra of the conservative coalition as militarism and racism.

Some scholars still posit a rather simplistic dichotomy between a hawkish Johnson and an increasingly dovish Congress and public. As the White House tapes indicate, the Texan had grave doubts about U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia from beginning to end. Why then did he proceed? Civil rights is absolutely fundamental to what Johnson was doing, and this bears on what Fry was saying. During this crucial period, Johnson is trying to get the Voting Rights Act through Congress. As he had done with the 1964 equal accommodations act, LBJ persuaded members of the Senate—southern Democrats, segregationists—not to vote for the 1965 measure, but to not obstruct its passage, to acquiesce. And in fact, they did. If you compare the reaction in the South to the passage of the '64 and '65 Civil Rights Acts to the Brown decision in 1954, it's totally different. They were ready to obey the law, at least that's what Richard Russell declared, a reaction very different from massive resistance.

Johnson could ask these Southerners to acquiesce in the passage of Civil Rights bills; he could not at the same time ask them to keep quiet about a possible neutralization of South Vietnam. As Fry has demonstrated, the South was consistently the most nationalist and hawkish region of the country. Johnson frequently said that he would never ask a member of Congress or the Senate to cast a vote that would defeat him. He did it once, but that was a rule that he stuck by. One could argue - and others have made this argument—that the 55,000 soldiers who died in Vietnam were sacrificed on the altar of Civil Rights. That's a bit melodramatic, but you could argue that.

Johnson had grave doubts about the success of the American enterprise in Vietnam. But he was not totally pessimistic. In the spring and summer of 1965, Johnson was spending more time on the Dominican Republic than he was on Vietnam, and he may have “learned” a lesson there. The temporary insertion of 22,000 U.S. troops had prevented a bloodbath between leftists and rightists and led in 1966 to the election –relatively free and fair – of the moderately conservative Juan Balanguer.

I think that critics of LBJ, and that includes Fulbright as well as the aforementioned historians, generally fail to understand (or, perhaps, acknowledge) what he was trying to do in Vietnam. Like presidents before and after him, Johnson viewed the American presence there to be temporary. We would put our finger in the dike until the South Vietnamese were able to stand politically, economically, and militarily for themselves as had (according to his perceptions) happened in the Philippines, Korea, Malay, and the Dominican Republic. Vietnamization – that was always the object of the war – started in earnest in 1966. The thrust of the “other war” was to try to get the Vietnamese to build a viable political culture, to create a governing apparatus that was, if not democratic, at least responsive to the 90 percent of the people who lived in the countryside, and then turn the war over to the South Vietnamese. In this sense, in terms of building a viable society in the south capable of governing and defending itself, a clear-cut American “victory” in Vietnam would have been counterproductive. By 1966, With LBJ’s support and encouragement, people like Robert Komer, William Colby, and John Paul Vann were working on the ground in Vietnam to force a change of policy. Search-and-destroy, free-fire zones were deemed counterproductive. Those in the field were met in Washington at the top by others: Harold Johnson, who was chief of staff of the Army, Creighton Abrams himself, who was Westmoreland’s lieutenant. What you see in 1968, after Tet, with Westmoreland’s departure and Abrams’s succession, and the coming of Bunker and Colby and the creation of CORDS, the giant pacification bureaucracy, is a change of policy, in which the military should be subsumed to the effort to create viable political structures and a decent standard of living in the provinces. But it was too late. The South Vietnamese were not able to pull up their socks, get their act together. Vietnamization was a success in the countryside, but the Americans were never able to connect their rice roots revolution with the central government in Saigon controlled by Nguyen Van Thieu and his cronies. And by this point the American people were tiring. If you look at the public debate, with some exceptions, after ’68, Americans were talking principally about domestic affairs. They weren’t paying any attention to what was going on in Vietnam. As Bill Colby said, “This country is not an imperial country. The American people gave us eight years, and that was probably more than we deserved.”<sup>1</sup> It was too late.

Ironically, the course of civil rights between 1966 and 1968 contributed to the breakup of the Vietnam consensus. LBJ had tapped into the wave of moral outrage among middle class white Americans that helped produce the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968 to

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<sup>1</sup> William Colby quoted in author’s interview with Paul Colby, June 5, 2007, Washington, D.C.

generate support for the conflict in Vietnam. If the Judeo-Christian ethic demanded action to end Jim Crow, he proclaimed, it also called for America to defend the brown and yellow people of Asia against the scourge of communism. With the rise of black power and with the wave of urban rioting that swept the country between 1966 and 1968, a powerful white backlash developed that rather quickly discredited the idealism of the Kennedy-Johnson era. To square the circle, not only did radicals like Floyd McKissick and Stokely Carmichael denounce the war, moderates like Martin Luther King turned against it as well.

In reality, the 36<sup>th</sup> president's thinking was not that far apart from dissenters within and without Congress. By late 1967 Johnson was moving toward acceptance of a coalition government in the south even if that led to neutralization and communization. "He is prepared for a cease fire and phased withdrawal of all combatants in Vietnam," Scotty Reston, a not uncritical observer of the president, noted in the New York Times. "He is willing to dismantle American bases in that peninsula; he is in favor of neutralization of all Southeast Asia, and he is prepared to let the peoples of South and North Vietnam decide their own political future even if this means a coalition with the Communists."<sup>2</sup> What Johnson could not permit, under any circumstances, was the overthrow of the Saigon regime by force of arms. To do so would threaten the entire containment regime so painstakingly built by Dean Acheson and the Wise Men in the post-World War II era. If America chose to abandon rather than modify containment, it would soon find itself alone in a dangerous world. In the end, the leaders of the Lao Dong were not willing to achieve their goals through peaceful means. If they waited, South Vietnam would fall through conquest. There would be no need for negotiations or concessions to either the Americans or the South Vietnamese. Time, they realized, was on their side. As Julian points out Congress has been no more successful in influencing the course of troop withdrawal during the first Gulf war, Iraq, and Afghanistan than it was during the Vietnam conflict. Indeed, the Bush administrations have been more successful in wielding the "support our troops" bludgeon than even Johnson and Nixon. Congress went as far as it did in the late 1960s and early 1970s with Cooper-Church, Hatfield McGovern, and the War Powers Act because of the strength and pervasiveness of the anti-war movement which drew from both hawks and doves and was energized by the civil rights movement, the Free Speech movement, the New Left, the draft, and the counterculture. Antiwar movements since then have been anemic by comparison. As both of these papers point out, the executive has been and will continue to be circumscribed by Congressional and public opinion in deciding to go to war and to an extent in how the war is fought, but not significantly in the duration of the war or the rate of troop withdrawal. Despite his campaign pledge to set a timetable for troop withdrawal from both Iraq and Afghanistan, President Obama this past year initiated one of the most significant surges of the post-911 conflicts.

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<sup>2</sup> James Reston, "The Tragedy of Skepticism," *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1966.

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