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Melvin Small, “Bring the Boys Home Now! Antiwar Activism and Withdrawal from Vietnam—and Iraq.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 543-554.

Chester Pach, “Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press”: TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969-1973.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 555-565.

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Review by **Ralph B. Levering**, Davidson College

I'd like to begin by thanking Marc Selverstone for inviting me to participate in this conference. I'm also pleased to have been asked to comment on the papers by Mel Small and Chester Pach. I've known Mel and Chester for many years, and I've always admired their writings.

I agree with much of what they argue in their papers—probably as much as 90 percent. But, in the interest of trying to stimulate discussion, I'll focus on the other 10 percent—and on information and perspectives I believe that they should have included in their papers, space permitting of course.

I'll begin with Mel Small's paper. My main criticism is that I think the paper does not focus enough on the fact that, like the civil rights movement earlier, the antiwar movement was an important participant in the politics of its era. Unlike the civil rights movement, however, the antiwar movement did not generate widely respected leaders who could articulate ideas, gain widespread public support for them, and translate them into meaningful legislation.

Who in the antiwar movement had the stature of A. Phillip Randolph, Ella Baker, or John Lewis, or Martin Luther King, Jr., to name just a few? Who in the antiwar movement effectively stood up against the radicals who broke windows and threw rocks and bottles

at police the way that Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins challenged the separatist, violence-inciting language of Malcolm X, H. Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael?

Like Small, I believe that the goals of the movement were generally good. Participants believed that America had made a serious mistake in getting involved in a large-scale war in Southeast Asia, and that the nation should end its involvement as soon as possible. These two ideas made sense to steadily growing numbers of Americans at the time. They still make sense, I believe, in retrospect.

But overall, the antiwar movement largely failed when compared with the other great movements of that era, civil rights, women's rights, and environmentalism. I wish to focus on antiwar activists during the 1968 election to illustrate what I believe was the movement's greatest failure.

Early on in his paper, Small notes that "the end game [was] in sight in 1968 if not earlier," and asks, "why did the United States hang on [in Vietnam] for so long?" (543)

The short answer to that question, I believe, is that America stayed for so long because Republican Richard Nixon won the 1968 presidential election. And, I would argue, the antiwar movement as a whole deserves a substantial share of the blame for the defeat of the more dovish and much more liberal Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey. So the key lesson I draw from the 1960s experience for today's antiwar activists is this: focus on electoral politics, especially presidential politics.

Before explaining how the antiwar movement contributed to Humphrey's defeat, I wish to challenge a common perception about the 1968 election among scholars of the antiwar movement, including Small. In his paper Small states this perception as follows: "During the general election, Humphrey and Nixon both promised to end the war with relative dispatch . . . making it difficult for antiwar voters to choose between the two candidates solely on the issue of the war." (546)

In fact, Humphrey was considerably more antiwar than Nixon. One of his key advisers on foreign policy was the dovish George Ball. Moreover, Humphrey said in a speech in early October that if elected he would "move toward a systematic reduction in American forces," regardless of what happened in the negotiations in Paris. In his hawkish response to Humphrey's statement, Nixon accused the vice president of advocating a turn-tail-and-run policy. Thinking along Nixon's lines, President Thieu of South Vietnam concluded that a Humphrey victory "would mean a coalition government in six months" that would effectively give the communists power in South Vietnam.

Humphrey also said in his well-known speech in Salt Lake City on September 30 that, if elected, he "would stop the bombing of the North as an acceptable risk for peace." After

that speech his spokesmen told the press, “What he’s really saying is that he’d pull the troops out and try to end the war January the twenty-first, 1969.”¹

Thus there were substantial reasons for the antiwar movement to support a liberal Democrat from Minnesota over a moderate-to-conservative Republican from southern California, especially because Humphrey would be under pressure from fellow liberals in Congress to end the war.

In what ways did the antiwar movement contribute to Humphrey’s defeat? Here we need to distinguish between the two branches of the anti-war movement, radicals and liberals. Many radicals wanted not only an end to the war; they also wanted revolutionary change leading to a socialist America. Even more damaging to their reputation among ordinary Americans was their use of obscenities and their overall behavior in demonstrations.

A passage about the March on the Pentagon in 1967 in Small’s excellent book *Antiwarriors* sums up the way the radicals often behaved: “The protesters chanted and shouted obscenities, while a small minority threw eggs, bottles, and even bags of excrement at the soldiers” protecting the Pentagon. “Several couples engaged in sexual intercourse . . . Jerry Rubin was arrested for urinating on a Pentagon wall.” As Small notes in his paper, “it is difficult to win over a majority of Americans to your point of view if you use indecorous tactics.” (551)

Because of its impact on public opinion nationwide, the behavior of the radical Left at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968 contributed greatly to Humphrey’s defeat that fall. As historian Lewis L. Gould has noted, “the Democrats left Chicago with their party in a shambles. The rioting in the streets had associated them in the minds of many Americans with lawlessness and disorder, precisely the charges leveled against them by Richard Nixon and George Wallace . . .”²

In the November election, Humphrey needed only 250,000 additional votes to gain a plurality; and, more important, he needed only 33 additional electoral votes to throw the election into the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives. The actions of radical demonstrators in Chicago helped to put Humphrey’s campaign into a hole from which it never fully emerged.

But the actions of many liberal activists, including myself, also hurt Humphrey. Although many of us ended up voting for him, many others didn’t, either staying home or voting for minor third-party candidates. Moreover, many liberal antiwarriors, including me, refused to send money to help the cash-strapped Humphrey campaign. Many of us also refused to help the Democratic effort by making phone calls, stuffing envelopes, and

¹ Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election that Changed America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1993), 145, 146.

² Gould, 134-35.

knocking on doors. Perhaps as much as the radicals, we liberal antiwarriors were responsible for Nixon's narrow victory.

In short, I would argue that the most significant failures of the anti-war movement occurred during 1968, when Humphrey lost a winnable election. It was winnable because, as in 1992, the more conservative vote was split between a Republican and an Independent candidate. And it was lost in good measure because many liberals and radicals did not know, or did not want to know, that, as Reinhold Niebuhr and many other thinkers have noted, politics often involves a choice not between absolute good and absolute evil, but rather between the lesser of two evils.

The liberal anti-war Democrat who showed the least understanding of this basic truth was Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy. After refusing to appear on the same stage with Humphrey in Chicago, McCarthy spent most of the late summer and fall acting as if he would be just as pleased by Nixon's election as by Humphrey's.

In the middle of the paper, Small argues that "antiwar activists, assisted by experts from academia, produced a host of proposals which, from hindsight, seem a lot more sensible than the policies pursued by the Johnson and Nixon administrations." (548) Although I especially admire two of those thinkers, John Kenneth Galbraith and Martin Luther King, I doubt the practicality of their proposals in 1967 for bringing peace to Vietnam.

The main problem with these proposals that allowed for U.S. withdrawal was this: Why would the North Vietnamese agree to let a departing United States set any limits on their freedom of action in South Vietnam? For example, they certainly would not have supported internationally supervised elections in South Vietnam unless they could be assured in advance of winning those elections. Even more basically, like all communist governments they did not believe in free and fair elections. And Galbraith's enclave proposal had the huge disadvantage of letting North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops freely occupy large areas of South Vietnam, from which they could attack South Vietnamese cities and U.S. and South Vietnamese troops at times and places of their choosing.

As in Vietnam in 1973 (troops) and 1975 (civilian officials), the United States is likely to discover in Iraq that, ultimately, the only way to get out is simply to get out. Like Nixon's Vietnamization plan, the proposals by Galbraith and King offered short-term rest areas on the highway to home.

I now turn more briefly to Chester Pach's paper, which contains much new and fascinating information about the discussions in the White House of the news media's coverage of the Vietnam issue during Nixon's first term. In 1985 my colleague at Davidson, Kathleen Turner, published a book entitled *Lyndon Johnson's Dual War: Vietnam and the Press*. Pach's paper could have had the same title, substituting Richard Nixon for Lyndon Johnson.

This is a paper that really needs to be read as well as heard. I say that because it's important to realize that the overwhelming majority of quotes criticizing news coverage from Nixon, Pat Buchanan, and other administration officials are from inter-office memos or from the Nixon tape recordings. In other words, administration officials generally were much more cautious and calculating about what they said publicly than about what they said or wrote privately.

I largely agree with Pach's argument in the paper, and commend him for the evidence that he uses to develop it. Indeed, for those of us who are professors, students in our classes could benefit greatly from studying this essay as a model of evidence-based argumentation. Nevertheless, I wish to offer two suggestions that Pach might wish to consider if he decides to expand this essay into a book.

First, I believe that he needed to analyze the accuracy of Nixon's subsequent claim that he had "entered the Presidency with less support from the major publications and TV networks than any President in history," as well as his insistence that "a 'solid majority' of journalists had 'a strong negative attitude' toward him . . ." (556) Given that the overwhelming majority of journalists at the time identified themselves as liberals and Democrats, and that earlier in his career Nixon had contributed to his difficulties in garnering positive media coverage, this insecure, cocky president might well have been largely accurate in his view that most journalists were not disposed to offer positive portrayals of his administration's policies in Vietnam.

Second, although I agree with Pach's conclusion that "Nixon achieved neither peace nor honor in his war with the news media" (565), I believe it is important for scholars to acknowledge that, despite substantial hostility in media coverage of Nixon's views from fall 1969 forward, he was able to maintain enough public and congressional support for his policies to work out what he considered to be an acceptable peace agreement with North Vietnam. Moreover, despite the fact that the war was continuing and American POWs were still being held in North Vietnam, in November 1972 this uncharismatic president won reelection in one of the biggest landslides in U.S. history.

Although I have not studied public opinion polls for these years with this question in mind, I would hypothesize that the fight the Nixon administration picked with the television networks in November 1969 may have contributed to maintaining the level of public and congressional support needed to continue the war for the next three years and two months. Moreover, the administration's criticisms of the news media, which journalist Douglass Cater rightly called the "fourth branch of government,"³ clearly did not hurt Nixon—and indeed may have helped him—in the 1972 election.

³ Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1959).

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At a time when so many prominent Democrats, especially in the Senate, were sharply criticizing Nixon's policies in Vietnam and trying to cut off funding for the war, it is instructive that Nixon, an astute politician, would say privately that "our worst enemy seems to be the press." (556) This comment suggests that Nixon believed that the news media was the second most influential branch of government in relationship to U.S. policies in Vietnam. It also suggests that he was less concerned about the influence of the antiwar movement.

I strongly agree with the second sentence in the concluding paragraph: "Nixon's troubles had less to do with hostile news media than [with] the inherent difficulties of withdrawing from Vietnam and the problems with policies he devised to extract the United States from the war." (565)

While acknowledging Nixon's troubles and difficulties in regard to Vietnam, I think he deserves some credit for his role in extracting the United States from the war. It is true, of course, that Nixon was under pressure throughout most of his first term from Congress, from public opinion, and from the most influential elements of the news media to end the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. But it was he who devised and implemented the strategy to do so. And then, after the peace agreement in January 1973, Congress helped greatly by passing a law that effectively ended U.S. military operations in Indochina.

One clear lesson from Vietnam is how difficult it is for a nation such as the United States, a nation with a highly competitive and partisan political system, to end a major military intervention in another country. As of June 2010, that lesson applies as much to the two presidents who have served during the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, as it does to the presidents who served during Vietnam.

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