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Review by **Charles F. Brower**, Virginia Military Institute

The spring of 1972 provided me a strong and personal appreciation of the politics of troop withdrawal, albeit one from a distinctly tactical perspective. My unit, F Troop, 17th Cavalry, 196th Infantry Brigade, was based southeast of Danang at Camp Faulkner and was at that point the last remaining American armored unit in Vietnam. On 30 March, the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive slammed into South Vietnamese positions in the I Corps Tactical Zone with conventional infantry and tank assaults backed by heavy artillery. The attacks quickly overran South Vietnamese positions in I Corps and seized the city of Quang Tri, and then shifted southward toward Hue. Another coordinated attack in II Corps threatened Kontum, while a third plunged into III Corps Tactical Zone northeast of Saigon, capturing Loc Ninh and advancing toward An Loc.

When the offensive was launched, F Troop’s twenty-six armored cavalry vehicles, nine “Sheridan” armored reconnaissance airborne assault vehicles, 216 troopers, and its 26-year old troop commander were poised to begin unit deactivation the following day. My platoons had been scheduled to enter the equipment turn-in sites and redeployment schedules for personnel to return to the United States had been published. F Troop may have been the last remaining American armored unit in Vietnam, but its troopers were already psychologically on the way home.

The alert order on 30 March startled the troop; if executed, it promised an incredible leadership challenge. Within 72 hours, however, the clear realities of Vietnamization and four years of unilateral American troop withdrawals apparently became more evident to

higher headquarters. The impending ground battle would be totally an ARVN affair, and F Troop was ordered to deactivate.

Here was a clear illustration on the forward edge of the battle area of how troop withdrawal policies indeed reduce military capabilities.

In this paper, Jeffrey Record seeks to explore other less obvious insights that might be gleaned from the American military withdrawal from Vietnam and then used to advantage our understanding of the contemporary challenges the United States faces as it seeks to extricate itself from Iraq. An accomplished and careful historian, he recognizes, like Henry Kissinger, that history teaches by analogy, not maxim, and that the value of an analogy depends crucially upon our understanding of its limits. Nonetheless, that others have taken less care in this regard is clear from the historical record. Indeed, the use and misuse of analogies and history by presidents and policymakers remains a thriving cottage industry. Richard Neustadt has gone so far to observe that most policymakers use analogies for two purposes: to persuade others or for personal comfort—or as he colorfully puts it, as “battering rams or Linus’ blankets.”¹

Not so in this paper, as Record stresses that the differences between the Vietnam and Iraq case greatly outnumber the similarities in scale, objectives, involved societies, and the nature of the insurgency. Perhaps most important, he reminds us that in the Iraq case, the United States faces a disparate, non-unitary enemy which, unlike the communist government in Hanoi, offers no single adversary with which to negotiate the politics of withdrawal.

However, he also notes that both cases shed common light upon the significant concerns American policymakers have about the dangers of protracted war and the traditional appreciation Americans have for the relationship between such domestic pressures and national policy and strategy. Following World War II, George C. Marshall succinctly captured the concept when he reminded his biographer that “a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years War.” The British military theorist and historian, B. H. Liddell Hart elaborated further by advancing the thesis that democratic strategists work on a “narrower margin of time and cost” than their non-democratic counterparts.²

Such concepts have placed great pressure on American strategists to develop strategies which deliver what might be called “incremental dividends” in order to sustain popular

¹ Otis L. Graham, “Using and Misusing History,” *The Long Term View* (Spring 1988), http://www.otisgraham.com/otis_graham_writings/art_using_and_misusing_history.html

² Marshall interview, July 25, 1949, cited in Maurice Matloff, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1943-1944* (Washington, 1959), 5; B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2^d rev. ed. (New York, 1967), 150.

support. That is, unless clear, incremental evidence of progress toward the strategic aim was demonstrated, the strategy and its political objective risked rejection.³

In his paper, Professor Record carefully describes a period in which the world's most powerful nation was slowly, painfully, reluctantly coming to grips with the limits of its power. He notes that Nixon and Kissinger viewed Vietnam as a "strategic impediment" to détente and normalization with the Soviet Union and China, essential elements of their so-called "grand design," and that Nixon believed that the war was no longer winnable in the traditional sense. Kissinger and Nixon fully appreciated the significant psychological component existing in international politics, however. Thus, credibility was an essential component of great power performance in their view. Indeed, how the United States could extricate itself credibly from a Vietnam War that both Nixon and Kissinger increasingly viewed as peripheral to American interests would preoccupy them for over four years.

One thing is certain: they firmly believed that an abrupt withdrawal would undermine the ability of the nation to play the central role they envisioned in their grand design. "We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead," Kissinger insisted, "as if we were switching a television channel....It was important for America not to be humiliated, not to be shattered."⁴

"Peace with Honor" became the administration's shorthand for their aim of being able to withdraw from Vietnam without having been forced to do so. Portraying this withdrawal as an act of policy, not collapse, would in their view allow the United States to play its keystone role in the international structure of peace they sought to construct.

The record clearly demonstrates that the Nixon-Kissinger strategy for attaining this ambitious aim was multi-faceted, creative, cynical, and ultimately unsuccessful. Their basic strategy sought a negotiated settlement while applying diplomatic, military, and psychological pressure on Hanoi and simultaneously strengthening the defensive capabilities of the South Vietnamese. Vietnamization would strengthen South Vietnam through huge transfusions of military and economic aid, the training and equipping of a larger South Vietnamese army, and transferring of the responsibility for the conduct of combat operations to Saigon, with an attendant reduction of the American combat role.

Détente and normalization were designed to isolate Hanoi from its Soviet and Chinese support by persuading Moscow and Beijing that the alluring benefits of the grand design

³ I am indebted to Paul L. Miles for framing this concept in terms of "incremental dividends."

⁴ Kissinger cited in John L. Gaddis, "Rescuing Choice from Circumstance," Gordon A. Craig and Frances L. Loewenheim, eds., *The Diplomats, 1939-1979* (Princeton, 1994), 574-75.

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outweighed the pleasure of sustaining an American quagmire in South East Asia. Cross border operations into Cambodia and Laos were to be spoiling attacks to buy time for Vietnamization to take root—and would also demonstrate to Hanoi the administration's willingness to raise the stakes, to exercise courses of action that previous administrations had ruled out.

Nixon's secret MENU bombings of Cambodia in 1969 and 1970, incursions into Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971, and mining of Haiphong and B-52 bombings of Hanoi in 1972 were calculated signals to Hanoi that it was now dealing with an unrestrained and perhaps unstable American leader. Here was the seed of the so-called "madman theory" attributed to Nixon—the belief that an adversary would be more willing to reach agreement or back away if he was not sure how his opponent might react.

Such strategies naturally fueled strident antiwar protests in America. Despite their tough talk, Nixon and Kissinger were not unaware that their strategy was threatened by such unrest. In this context, Nixon's aggressive plan for the phased withdrawal of American forces, carefully coordinated with administration initiatives, was an effort on their part to make a virtue out of necessity by timing troop withdrawals on a schedule designed to take the wind from the antiwar sails.

Consider, for example, the timing of Nixon's announcement, ten days before the 1970 invasion of Cambodia, that 150,000 American troops would be withdrawn before the following spring. "The time has come," he privately told aides, "to drop a bombshell on the gathering spring storm of antiwar protest."⁵

This glimpse of Nixon's rationale and his sense of importance of timing reveal the pre-planned nature of the troop withdrawal strategy, its place in the administration's overall Vietnam strategy, and its aims. As Record notes, troop withdrawals and Vietnamization also combined to dramatically reduce American casualties. When coupled with the administration's termination of Selective Service draft calls, the student protest heart of the antiwar movement was greatly weakened. Even acerbic Kissinger critic Roger Morris grudgingly acknowledges that "domestic dissent faded steadily with the American troop withdrawals."⁶

No matter how elegantly conceived their Vietnam strategy may have been, no matter how well they coordinated the various instruments of national power, John Gaddis reminds us that Nixon and Kissinger were like short money players in a high stakes poker game. Phased troop withdrawals weakened the American hand significantly and provided little

⁵ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978), 448.

⁶ Roger Morris, *Uncertain Greatness: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1976), 168.

incentive for Hanoi to concede on outstanding political issues. As a result, as Record demonstrates, American concessions followed and the January 1973 version of Peace with Honor differed significantly from the version envisioned in 1969, most significantly in the abandonment of the mutual troop withdrawal provision.

I find it very difficult to disagree with Record's conclusion that the Nixon and Kissinger strategy was essentially one designed to cut American losses in an unpopular war they had decided they could not win at any acceptable price, even though they understood that withdrawal meant near the certain loss of South Vietnam.

However, it is good practice to judge leaders and nations not only by their actions but also by their conception of alternatives. Kissinger made this point in *A World Restored*, where he argued that the true test of statesmanship rested not with the "perfection of order," but instead required the spirit to stand at the abyss and "to have the strength to contemplate chaos, and therein to find material for fresh creation."⁷

Few would doubt that the Nixon administration faced new and complex international challenges in 1969 that would test its imagination and leadership. The president and his adviser had to extricate the United States from Vietnam, contain the Soviet Union under dangerous conditions of strategic parity, deal with the expanded influence of a dynamic Europe and Japan, and establish under these conditions a new and stable equilibrium, all the while adjusting to a new and unfamiliar national appreciation for the limits of American power.

Robert Jervis has argued in his earlier paper that Nixon's slow withdrawal strategy bought him (1) a degree of strategic flexibility and some retention of initiative; (2) at least one important political concession from Hanoi (its dropping of its demand that the U.S. remove the Thieu government); and (3) the time for a substantial change in the international environment that allowed a decent interval and attenuation of the consequences of American defeat.

Perhaps these alternatives were the best that could be rescued from the circumstances Nixon and Kissinger inherited. Was Nixon's "strategy of lingering" a prerequisite for securing a decent interval between American withdrawal and North Vietnamese victory? Did that interval justify the enormous price in blood and treasure that four more years of war entailed? Was a negotiated settlement in 1969 trading an American withdrawal for the return of American prisoners of war and saving the nearly 21,000 American and countless Vietnamese casualties lost between 1969 and 1973 a reasonable possibility? Would such a settlement truly have been the calamitous threat to international equilibrium and American national security that Nixon and Kissinger predicted so darkly?

⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Restoration of Europe, 1812-1822* (Boston, 1975), 213.

These difficult questions are at the heart of the matter, yet ultimately their answers will likely remain elusive. “History is lived forwards but it is written in retrospect,” C. V. Wedgwood reminds us. “We know the end before we consider the beginning and we can never wholly recapture what it was to know the beginning only.”⁸

Professor Record is therefore also appropriately cautious when it comes to offering insights from the politics of troop withdrawal in Vietnam for our contemporary challenges in Iraq. My sense is that he’s heavily influenced (as I am) by that great American philosopher king Yogi Berra, who warns us that “It’s tough making predictions, especially about the future.” Record assumes there will be a substantial drawdown, with its actual pace to be influenced substantially by the results of the American presidential election in November; by evidence (or the lack thereof) of a reduction in sectarian and ethnic violence in Iraq; and by evidence (or the lack thereof) of enhanced and effective indigenous governance.

In Record’s view, the American withdrawal will be complete without a residual American military presence. I agree with that conclusion: in Iraq, regrettably but perhaps unsurprisingly, U.S. forces and representatives have assumed to a large degree the roles of occupiers and outsiders. In the final analysis, the decisive words, actions, and responsibilities must rest with the host country government and its security forces, not Americans.

As in the case of the Nixon administration, the Bush administration should be judged not just by its actions but also its conception of the alternatives it now faces in the lee of its surge strategy. The administration has signaled clearly that it will seek to exploit what it sees as the security gains linked to its surge strategy (gains which they see as having helped to clear the way for political and economic developments) and that it will stabilize force levels in Iraq probably at or near the pre-surge level of 140,000 until the presidential inauguration in January 2009. While acknowledging the war’s heavy financial costs, the administration argues its costs are “relatively modest,” noting that the defense budget accounts for just over 4% of our economy, a percentage lower than any point during four decades of the Cold War. The president reminds us that this “modest fraction of our nation’s wealth” pales when compared to the cost of another terrorist attack on our people.⁹

In the administration’s view, the United States has a moral responsibility to avoid a premature withdrawal, as civil war could very easily descend into genocide, destabilizing

⁸ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York, 1969), xvii.

⁹ “Bush Responds to Petraeus and Crocker’s Testimonies on Iraq,” *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2008, <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/10/AR2008041001834.html> .

the entire region and endangering our national security interests. “If the U.S. fails in Iraq, al Qaeda would claim a propaganda victory of colossal proportions,” the president told the nation on April 10, 2008, “and they could gain safe havens in Iraq from which to attack the United States, our friends and our allies.” He believes further that Iran would fill the vacuum in Iraq, and our failure would embolden its radical leaders and fuel their ambitions to dominate the region. The Taliban in Afghanistan and al Qaeda in Pakistan would also grow in confidence and boldness, and other violent extremists around the world would draw the same dangerous lesson they did from our retreats in Somalia and Vietnam.¹⁰

But American success in Iraq would constitute for the president “an historic blow to the global terrorist movement and a severe setback for Iran. It would demonstrate...that mainstream Arabs reject the ideology of al Qaeda, and that mainstream Shia reject the ideology of Iran’s radical regime. It would give America a new partner with a growing economy and a democratic political system in which Sunnis and Shias and Kurds all work together for the good of their country. In all these ways, it would bring us closer to our most important goal—making the American people safer here at home.”¹¹

Apparently the administration isn’t much into reflection or strategic reassessment. This “stay-the- course” prescription clearly doesn’t offer much in terms of enhancing the administration’s reputation for strategic creativity.

Is there a case for strategic patience in Iraq? Anthony Cordesman has offered what he freely admits is “tenuous” one. A beguiling mixture of a Pottery Barn “if you break it, you buy it” philosophy, moral and ethical guilt, and hard-boiled realism, Cordesman’s advocacy for strategic patience clearly targets the next administration. His argument rests on the opportunity to exploit the “real military progress” taking place in Anbar province and Northern Iraq as a result of the “lucky” convergence of more effective U.S. counterinsurgency efforts with a major Sunni tribal uprising against Al Qaeda and other abusive, hard-line Sunni Islamist elements; “some indications” that moderate Shi’ite leaders are becoming equally concerned about the Sadr militia; the weakness of Prime Minister Maliki and his government; the role of Iran; and presence of the most impressive and experienced U.S. Country Team since the beginning of the conflict.¹²

And, what presence of are the odds of success? “No one can honestly say,” he admits, “but they may be better than even *if* Iraq’s political leaders do move forward in 2008, *if*

¹⁰ George W. Bush, “America, the Military, and the Future of Iraq,” April 10, 2008, Washington, DC, <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/04.10.08.html> .

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Tenuous Case for Strategic Patience in Iraq,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies Trip Report*, August 6, 2007, 7-22.

the Sunnis are co-opted by the government and brought into the Iraqi Security Forces, and *if* the U.S. does not rush out for domestic political purposes.”¹³

Accepting such a risky strategy that will have to react to events rather than shape them and do so in a climate in which the odds of success are often less than even reflects Cordesman’s conclusion that the U.S. does not have any good options with regard to Iraq; it must accept “the least bad option.”¹⁴ He argues that no course of action will prevent the U.S. from being linked to the future of Iraq, regardless of whether it maintains a military presence. The U.S. cannot fully reverse attitudes in Iraq, the region, allied states, and increasingly in America that it has lost the war and is morally responsible for immense Iraqi suffering.¹⁵

He argues cautiously that America may have it in its power to greatly ameliorate them over time, however. “It seems likely that the U.S. will be judged far more by how it leaves Iraq, and what it leaves behind, than how it entered Iraq,” he concludes.¹⁶

Neither the administration’s “stay the course” strategy or Cordesman’s call for strategic patience seem likely to be able to provide the incremental dividends of progress toward the political aim necessary to sustain the American people’s investment of blood and treasure. Recently Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes have directly challenged the administration’s “relatively low cost” thesis, arguing that a more careful accounting reveals that the cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts have grown to staggering proportions, costs estimated at \$3 trillion, a third again the cost of the twelve-year long Vietnam war and already outstripping the cost of every American war except the Second World War.¹⁷

Neither does either strategy forthrightly address the very real possibility that the Maliki government or its successor may be the ones to dictate the pace of the American withdrawal by inviting us to leave on its timetable. This is one of the basic truths of the politics of withdrawal: once the host country concludes that the United States is going to leave, it will seek to create the conditions that best serve its interests under those circumstances. Neither President Obama nor the Congress nor the American people may

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Linda J. Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, “The Iraq War Will Cost Us \$3 Trillion, and Much More,” *The Washington Post*, March 9, 2008, <http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/07/AR200803070846.html> .

ultimately be the determiners of the precise departure date, despite their best efforts to dictate a timetable.

Therefore, given an ambiguous and uncertain outcome; an ill-defined timetable for success; an increased sense by Americans of the perils of overstretch and vulnerability; broadening international and domestic revulsion: and the increased strain on the international and domestic economy of a war that is costing \$12. 5 billion a month for Iraq alone, I do not think it would be a bold conclusion that the next administration will face virtually irresistible pressures to promptly create the conditions for its own decent interval strategy for Iraq.

In my view, the practical realities of the logistics of withdrawal and disengagement such a decision would involve a period of 18 to 24 months, presuming the decision remains an American one and unless we are prepared to destroy or leave behind substantial military equipment and supplies and lay aside all efforts to ameliorate the damage we have inflicted there and upon our nation.

In this sense, a decent interval strategy takes on a different case: Withdrawal on a schedule that allows the opportunity for us to do the decent, ameliorative thing.¹⁸

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¹⁸ President Obama's withdrawal timetable announced on 27 February 2009 pledged to reduce American forces to the 35,000-50,000 level and end the American combat role by 31 August 2010. All remaining forces are to be withdrawn by 31 December 2010. See Peter Baker, "With Pledges to Troops and Iraqis, Obama Details Pullout," *The New York Times*, 28 February 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/washington/28troops.html> . Just how much the U.S. can do to in terms of amelioration remains to be seen.