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Mark Atwood Lawrence. “Too Late or Too Soon? Debating the Withdrawal from Vietnam in the Age of Iraq.” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010): 589-600. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00872.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00872.x> .

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Author’s Response by **Jeffrey P. Kimball**, Miami University (emeritus)

I thank David Kaiser for his insightful comments, Marc Selverstone for arranging and hosting the 2008 conference at the Miller Center and for so ably editing the papers for publication, and H-Diplo editors for editing and facilitating this discussion. Although I have no serious quarrel with Kaiser’s remarks, he brought up at least two issues that bear on our historical understanding of Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War, which, I believe, deserve further discussion.

I will first point out for those who have not read my article that my core argument is that among the most important American political legacies of the U.S.-Vietnam War are the stab-in-the-back legend and the Vietnam Syndrome critique. I suggested that these amount to myths because they are demonstrably untrue in whole or substantial part. Further, I maintain that it was Nixon's conscious and deliberate words, actions, and non-actions that served to provide the historical narrative of betrayal, which portrayed liberals, the Left, the antiwar movement, Congress, and the press as the agents of defeat in Vietnam. In effect, Nixon (and his allies) synthesized the various ingredients of the primordial soup already stewing in the cauldron of Right-wing political culture. I suggest that neither Nixon nor Kissinger took responsibility for the policies they pursued and concealed from the public and historians. Implicitly, I make the theoretical point that cultural phenomena do not emerge spontaneously from an amorphous national culture

but are the product of intelligent design – of human agency; i.e., particular individuals and groups provide the narrative or the storyline for cultural/historical myths.

As for the two observations that Kaiser made and on which I'd like to comment, the first has to do with my claims about Nixon's failure to take responsibility: "Kimball also notes that Nixon failed to live up to the example of his conservative heroes Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, the latter of whom patiently explained to the French people that further attempts to hold on to Algeria would weaken, not strengthen, the greatness of France, and survived right-wing assassination attempts as a result. (I am not sure what episode in Churchill's career Kimball is thinking of.)"

I am not an expert on Churchill, but I suppose the Churchillian equivalent to de Gaulle's behavior regarding the Algerian crisis was Churchill's role in the "Malayan Emergency." Churchill also seems to have regretted the British attack on the French navy at Oran in 1940, even though he thought it necessary and took responsibility for it – as far as I know. But when I wrote what I wrote about Nixon and Churchill in my article, I was not necessarily referring to a Churchillian equivalent to de Gaulle's handling of France's extrication from Algeria. What I wrote had to do with what Nixon was thinking – that is, what he believed was true about Churchill's character. In a nutshell, and as the Haldeman Diaries and White House tapes reveal, Nixon admired Churchill because he saw him as a model conservative Realist who had been courageous in overcoming failure and audacious in using military force. In Nixon's view, Churchill had been a great national and world leader who had faced up to major crises and accepted responsibility for his controversial actions. These were, of course, qualities Nixon admired, aspired to, and believed he possessed in some measure. My point is that Nixon did not take his share of responsibility for the collapse of South Vietnam or for the way in which he withdrew from South Vietnam – even though he admired Churchill for, among other things, taking responsibility for his actions. Nixon's failure to take responsibility, I suggest, contributed to the two mythical political legacies about which I wrote.

The second observation of David Kaiser's that I'd like to address is this: "Kimball does not mention—although I suspect he might agree—that Henry Kissinger and the North Vietnamese actually trapped Nixon, in the final analysis, into making peace, first by reaching an October agreement that conceded key military and political demands to the enemy, and then by Hanoi's public release of the agreement and Kissinger's own statement that 'peace is at hand'."

For the record, I do not agree. In any case, it is an issue that deserves discussion. While documents and tapes indicate that Kissinger did occasionally mislead or misinform Nixon by omitting or shading certain facts in his memos and reports (especially about negotiations with the North Vietnamese and Soviets), neither he nor the North Vietnamese, according to the evidence I've seen, "trapped" Nixon into "making peace." Nixon knew full well what was going on before and after October 1972 and was the key player in staging the final scene; i.e., no negotiated agreement in October or November

1972; instead, the launching of operation Linebacker II in December and a "peace" agreement in January 1973 – despite Thieu's objections.

A larger historiographic issue, which is related to this question, is the matter of whether Nixon or Kissinger was the architect of the administration's diplomacy – whether it had to do with the Vietnam War, détente, rapprochement, the Middle East, or other matters. I have argued on several occasions that Nixon was more the strategist and Kissinger more the tactician and the enabler; but Nixon was the boss. Others have emphasized either Nixon's or Kissinger's dominant roles.

A related issue has to do with the influence of other individuals and groups – besides Nixon and Kissinger – on Washington's Vietnam policy. It has been argued, for example, that Melvin Laird was primarily responsible for Vietnamization – Vietnamization in the sense of de-Americanization. It is true that Laird was a powerful and skillful advocate for accelerated (and unilateral) de-Americanization, but he was not its architect – and he was not successful, inasmuch as Nixon and Kissinger extended unilateral U.S. withdrawals and the American war to January 1973. De-Americanization was part of Nixon's strategy from the beginning, and the origins of the idea lay with the antiwar opposition and segments of Johnson's national security bureaucracy. Kissinger's quarrel with Laird was with the pace of de-Americanization in relation to three issues: its effect on the administration's policy of coercive military/diplomatic measures against Hanoi; the impact of U.S. troop withdrawal on Saigon's durability; and its relationship to the Nixon-Kissinger 1972 timetable for extrication.

There were many influences and constraints on Nixon and Kissinger from within and without the administration at home and abroad (including the Vietnamese, Soviets, and Chinese), but in the context of these influences and constraints Nixon and Kissinger designed and controlled U.S. policy in a willing but troubled partnership – at least that's what the evidence tells me.

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