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### H-Diplo Article Review 780 on “Nuclear Weapons, Coercive Diplomacy and the Vietnam War.”

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### Comments

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## [H-Diplo Article Review 780 on “Nuclear Weapons, Coercive Diplomacy and the Vietnam War.”](#)

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**“Nuclear Weapons, Coercive Diplomacy and the Vietnam War.”** *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19:4 (Fall 2017): 192-210.

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Review by **Luke A. Nichter**, Texas A&M University–Central Texas

**A**s academics, we spend a lot of time commenting—on student work, in the classroom, as discussants at conferences, and on manuscripts under consideration. (Maybe I should do less talking and more listening). Nonetheless, professing is what we do. Therefore, there can be no higher calling than being asked to comment on the commenters—a discussion led

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by Robert Jervis and Mark Atwood Lawrence for the *Journal of Cold War Studies* of William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball's recent work, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War*, which I reviewed previously for H-Diplo, in November 2015.<sup>[1]</sup>

In my review of this groundbreaking book, I praised it for its important work in illuminating the pre-taped period of Vietnam policy in the first year of the Nixon presidency and the connections between campaign pledges and what eventually became policy, and for how Burr and Kimball weave together all they have written previously about subjects such as the decent internal and mad man theories, and Nixon era Vietnam policy more generally, and what our understanding of these subjects brings to bear on the October 1969 secret nuclear alert and Operation Duck Hook. I was less complimentary regarding material that seemed to be a redux of material that had appeared in earlier works by the authors, which contributed to a book that was perhaps denser than was necessary. That seems to be a critique echoed by Jervis and Lawrence.

This review affords something ever so rare—a second bite of the apple, with the benefit of having read the remarks by Jervis and Lawrence. What surprises me the most, nearly three years after the book first appeared, is that we are still talking about it. I do not say this to diminish the importance of the book, but to echo Lawrence's comment: the book is about a "non-event," "the mere 'specter' of a nuclear war that never came close to occurring in practice." (201) Both Jervis and Lawrence raise a number of important issues.

Jervis makes a convincing point that President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger basically set out to ratify "Lyndon Johnson's view that a military solution was impossible, while gaining a victory at the negotiating table by coercing the USSR into putting sufficient pressure on North Vietnam to withdraw its troops from the South." (193) Kissinger had been advising something similar since the fall of 1965, when he first visited Saigon as consultant to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. - his first job as a practitioner of foreign policy. I agree with Jervis that "the nuclear alert was a bit bizarre but hardly conveyed madness. I do not think anything Nixon did met this criterion." (196) Lawrence is exactly right that this is the story of the dog that did not bark. (201) However, can we still learn something about the nature of the dog? That is discussed later. Also, I agree that "some readers may feel that Burr and Kimball overstate the administration's certainty about the inevitability of South Vietnam's defeat and the single-mindedness with which Nixon and Kissinger embraced the 'decent interval' logic." (199) The idea that Nixon, or anytime wartime president, rigidly adhered to a singular strategy and was immune to daily ups and down is absurd. There are some days on the Nixon tapes in which Nixon and Kissinger desire no interval at all except the time necessary to withdraw American POWs. However, Nixon never had a 'secret plan' to end the war. The pledge of a 'secret plan' was a creation of the press who covered his 1968 campaign based on the fact that Nixon was not willing to

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reveal what his Vietnam policy was. William Safire wrote with fascination about how myths like the 'secret plan' get created, and how difficult they are to eradicate. [\[2\]](#)

The fact that we are still talking the book shows that Burr and Kimball have made an enduring case for their work. Even the history of a 'non-event' intrigues, whether on its own merit or, perhaps even more, because of what it reveals about Nixon and Kissinger and the decision-making process they would use to eventually settle on their Vietnam policy. The process is the aspect least discussed in the book and in the remarks by Jervis and Lawrence, and is the least understood. There has been too much guesswork into Nixon's state of mind, into the way he made decisions, and into the relationship between domestic and foreign policy.

Take the period at the other end of Nixon's struggle with Vietnam, around the time of the Christmas Bombing. Nixon's diaries provide valuable insight into his thought process. "This is January the 9<sup>th</sup>, 1973, my sixtieth birthday," he recorded later that day. [\[3\]](#) "I got up this morning around 7:30 or 7:45 and had a glance at the paper. The *Times* has the birthday interview on the front page... It was very heartwarming to have the elevator and telephone operator say happy birthday as I came in today." His diary entries are particularly revelatory about how difficult Vietnam had made his presidency since his landslide reelection in November, a time period when most newly reelected presidents are celebrating. "Pat, and of course Tricia, go through a great deal because they read the news summaries in the press, the editorials and the rest. I know how vicious they are...I have not been reading the news summaries since the election. That has maybe been one of the things that keeps my balance. I realize that does tend to keep me somewhat isolated from the hurly-burly of the discussion." [\[4\]](#)

We do not have similar records for President Lyndon Johnson, but both he and Nixon were personally changed by the war. You can imagine almost any wartime president going through something similar at some point of exhaustion. "Sleeping continues to be a problem," he continued. "When this happens again, I think I will get up and read and try to see whether I can work. The problem is when I do that, I find it very difficult going back to sleep. Then I have a sense of fatigue the next day, usually in the middle of the morning." His deteriorating health affected every initiative, domestic and foreign, and stalled the planning for his second term just as he needed energy and clarity the most. "On this whole series of negotiations, Henry has consistently been wrong. He always is, all of the time, he is always speaking in terms of rational people. The Vietnamese, North and South, are basically not rational...Although in the long run I think the very effect of ending the war is all that matters. [sighs]...In attempting to get our [second term government] reorganization through, it is very likely that we will do the reorganization at a very great cost, on two scores. One, I haven't been able to get any rest since, and I really needed it after the

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campaign, that everybody needed it. Secondly, I was unable to pay as much attention as I would have liked to the whole Paris negotiations, although I doubt if I did it would have had much effect.”<sup>[5]</sup> Also, the diaries later reveal why Nixon faltered so badly as the Watergate inquiries intensified: he was not well. One wonders how that time period could have been different had President Harry Truman and Johnson not died within a month of each other. Watergate was as much the prosecution of the ‘Imperial Presidency’ as anything, and the powers of the presidency had been growing since the dawn of the Cold War. Nixon faced this trial alone, as the only living president. Other presidents probably would not have defended the specific excesses of the Nixon administration, but they would have defended the presidency. It could have been a very different scenario for Nixon had especially Johnson lived even one more year.

It may seem as if this review has gotten off track and has introduced a number of subjects that do not seem related to the one I set out to discuss. This is necessary since it reflects the way Nixon considered a nuanced, sophisticated set of variables before making a decision. When one spends enough time immersed in these sources, whether diaries or White House tapes, one comes to recognize certain patterns. Nixon never quite became predictable, but one has a basis for comparing different statements and actions, whether related to domestic policy or foreign policy. An appreciation for this appears to be missing from this discussion. I suspect the most important explanation behind the ‘non-event’ of the October 1969 secret nuclear alert was domestic policy, not foreign policy.

That is why the alert did not cause particular concern for the Soviet Union, and why Secretary of State Alexander Haig noted when raising it that it was to be, among other things, “not threatening to the Soviets.” (194) Having actual recordings from the fall of 1969 would be more ideal, but the Nixon White House taping system did not start capturing conversations until February 1971. However, the next best thing is having recordings from other periods. The vast trove of recordings that Nixon left us allows us to identify some patterns in his decision-making process. For example, Nixon spoke of the need to ‘prick the boil’ when it came to the moment to make a decision—a bold action when it was least expected. He did this a number of times during his presidency—the China announcement, the suspension of gold a month later, the May 8, 1972 bombing and mining of Hanoi and Haiphong, the Moscow summit, the Christmas Bombing, and others. Second, Nixon liked to pair what he saw as complementary private and public actions. If publicly he was tough, in private channels he was more diplomatic. Pairing actions perceived as strong and weak was as important to him as pairing private and public actions - sometimes even multiples of each.

Finally, sometimes recordings reveal that the real purpose of a foreign policy action was a desired domestic outcome. The example I have written about the most is the path to Nixon’s August 15, 1971 decision to suspend the Bretton Woods system and its aftereffects.<sup>[6]</sup> One

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quotation from the Nixon tapes stands out as being appropriate time and again during his presidency in terms of how he saw his options when backed into a corner and forced to make a decision:

Nixon: I tend not to be as persuaded by the international monetary arguments as I am by the domestic arguments. So therefore I am inclined to think that we should consider doing all those things domestically which would also have a good effect internationally, and as a last resort do the international thing, except of course floating. The floating thing I think is so goddamned confusing that nobody's going to understand. Closing the gold window sounds as if the dollar is going to hell, that's to the average person. [\[7\]](#)

Based on how Nixon made complex foreign policy decisions, I suspect that is what was really going on during October 1969. He thought about foreign policy in terms of the domestic policy consequences, something that has not been considered nearly as much in our discussion of the 1969 nuclear alert, as we have focused on specific foreign policy actions. Part of the reason I suspect we are still talking about this is that it continues to vex us, and will continue to do so for as long as we consider it a foreign policy action alone.

For example, what is missing most from the story is how, by the fall of 1969, Congress announced that Nixon's honeymoon period with respect to Vietnam was over, and the White House faced heightened pressure to establish a timetable for withdrawal. Three senators in particular were vocal, including Edmund Muskie (D-ME), who had been the Democratic vice-presidential running mate with Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Fred Harris (D-OK), who was national co-chair of Humphrey's presidential bid, and, in Nixon's defense, Hugh Scott (R-PA). Majorities in the Democrat-controlled House and Senate demanded action. [\[8\]](#) (5) Apart from vocal activism on this topic, these three also have something else in common: they do not appear in the index of Burr and Kimball's book. While Congress made clear it expected bold action by the White House on Vietnam, Nixon paired a weak effort, Henry Cabot Lodge's meetings with the North Vietnamese in Paris, with a strong effort, passage of the "Support the President" resolution in Congress, which passed with 300 votes in the House and 58 in the Senate. Nixon used the mandate from those votes, which included a 60-day moratorium on criticizing the White House, to announce the October nuclear alert and 'prick the boil' with his November 3 'Silent Majority' speech—arguably the most significant address of his presidency. In my view, the October 1969 secret nuclear alert makes more sense when one considers these other dimensions. The story is indeed a 'non-event' if we do not consider the domestic policy implications of foreign policy decisions. Unless we consider a more nuanced set of variables and archival sources, including tapes and foreign sources, the dog that does not bark will never do so.

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**Luke A. Nichter** is a Professor of History at Texas A&M University–Central Texas. His books include *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), the *New York Times* bestseller *The Nixon Tapes: 1971-1972* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), *The Nixon Tapes: 1973* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), and the forthcoming *Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. and the Decline of the Eastern Establishment* (Yale University Press, expected 2019).

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## Notes

[1] \_\_\_ William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball. *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015) See my review at <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/98962/nichter-burr-and-kimball-nixons-nuclear-specter-secret-alert-1969>.

[2] \_\_\_ See William Safire, "Secret Plan," in *Safire's Political Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 647.

[3] \_\_\_ The Richard Nixon Presidential Library has never released Nixon's private diaries and might not even possess them. Nixon's last will and testament refers to the disposition of diary materials, including yellow notepads, other writings, and recordings. They have been used in only a few books. However, Nixon sometimes recorded a diary in rooms that were recorded as part of his White House taping system. It is clear from these recordings that Nixon did not intend for such duplication to take place.

[4] \_\_\_ Nixon Diary, 9 January 1973, a portion of which is recorded on Oval Office conversation 836-004, 9 January 1973, Unknown time between 8:28 a.m. and 8:56 a.m.

[5] \_\_\_ Ibid.

[6] \_\_\_ See chapter 2, "Closing the Gold Window," in Luke A. Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[7] \_\_\_ Luke A. Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 56.

[8] \_\_\_ The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* for 1969 covers the back-and-forth between the Hill and the White House in the lead-up to the October nuclear alert. A portion is available online for free: <https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqal69-871-26652-1245915>.