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### Comments

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## [Nichter on Burr and Kimball, 'Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War'](#)

Review published on Saturday, November 28, 2015

**William Burr, Jeffrey P. Kimball.** *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 448 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-2082-1.

**Reviewed by** Luke A. Nichter (Texas A&M University-Central Texas) **Published on** H-Diplo (November, 2015) **Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach

It is difficult to find a scholar who studies Richard Nixon's presidency who has not benefited from at least one book written by William Burr or Jeffrey P. Kimball. Though long-time colleagues, up to now they have broken ground separately on subjects such as the decent interval and madman theories, the Nixon tapes, and the study of Nixon-era war and diplomacy more generally through works such as Burr's *The Kissinger Transcripts* (1999) and Kimball's *The Vietnam War Files* (2004) and *Nixon's Vietnam War* (1998). These works shaped future works, and these volumes on my shelves stand as a reminder that my own work on the Nixon tapes would not have happened without them.

In their latest project, Burr and Kimball join forces to bring us *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War*. The book is much more than initially meets the eye. For a Burr-Kimball aficionado, it is part mash-up of previous works and part journey into the shadowy world of Nixon's proto-Vietnam strategy. The book fills an important, forgotten gap between Nixon's 1968 campaign promise of a secret plan to the end the war and a more thoroughly studied--and secretly taped--period of time beginning in 1971. Burr and Kimball's work is based on hundreds of formerly classified records as well as interviews--more often than not with those who have been critical of the Nixon White House. It is also supplemented by a release of primary source records on George Washington University's National Security Archive website.[1]

Long before Nixon's centerpiece foreign policy achievements during 1972, the opening year of his presidency saw him grasping for ideas that might help to quickly solve the Vietnam War and fulfill a murky campaign promise. In the midst of his 1968 campaign, Nixon scribbled some shorthand thoughts on one of his famous yellow legal notepads: "what situation will be in January 1969, no one will predict ... but after four years of failure, it's time for new leadership to end the war on a basis that will win lasting peace in Pacific." While these sound like campaign talking points, Nixon did allude to elements of what became his eventual strategies of Vietnamization, triangular diplomacy, and détente: "We failed to train V. Nam to take over fighting.... We failed to put emphasis on non military aspects.... Failed diplomatically to enlist Soviet[s]."[2] Burr and Kimball's book is a "what happened next"--the extent to which candidate Nixon's ideas played out in policy in Nixon's early presidency.

Specifically, Nixon, with the help of national security adviser Henry Kissinger, hoped that a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union would bring to bear greater pressure on the North

Vietnamese. But Nixon would not accept just any peace terms. According to Soviet ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin, the president emphasized twice that he would “never ... accept a humiliating defeat on humiliating terms.”[3] The other problem was that US-Soviet relations were not terribly constructive in Nixon’s first year of office. In perhaps the very first of what later became known as the “Nixon shocks,” in October 1969 the White House issued a secret nuclear alert as part of a plan to bomb and mine Haiphong harbor and the coastline, a plan codenamed Operation Duck Hook. Why Nixon did this, for what purpose, and what the long-term consequences were are the central investigative questions in Burr and Kimball’s work.

There is still some debate among scholars whether the purpose of the nuclear alert and Duck Hook was more specifically to coerce the Soviets into helping end the Vietnam War or more generally for the Nixon White House to show displeasure with the state of US-Soviet relations at the time.[4] Burr and Kimball argue that Nixon and Kissinger abandoned Duck Hook when it did not appear that North Vietnam or the Soviet Union planned to concede, as well as due to rising domestic resistance to the war following his November 3 nationally televised speech. Nixon’s failed gambit to quickly end the Vietnam War meant that Nixon and Kissinger were forced to take a much longer road to peace.

While that alone is an important new finding, there is so much more in this rich book and much of it has relevance to contemporary public policy discussions. Readers will appreciate the background on nuclear diplomacy going back to Harry Truman’s administration and the dawn of the Cold War. Also particularly interesting are chapters dealing with the madman theory, the decent interval theory, and the Nixon Doctrine, each of which are subjects of a growing literature and active scholarly debate, as well as subjects the authors have written about in the past. In fact, for that reason, these parts of the book feel less groundbreaking than the rest; the authors do not add much to what they have written previously.

These topics are important to understanding Nixon’s approach to Duck Hook and foreign policy making more generally. Burr and Kimball are right to point out Nixon’s uses (and misuses) of history, including lessons he learned from the 1950s while Dwight Eisenhower’s apprentice. A consummate consumer of history, Nixon sometimes fit the narrative to suit his purpose and defend his policies, such as when he invoked Eisenhower and the Korean War to defend his actions during the Vietnam War. Is this problem unique to Nixon? Probably not. And all presidents to some degree utilize a madman approach to making foreign policy--even these days as the United States faces a resurgent Russian threat.[5] At the same time, Burr and Kimball remind us how dangerous it was for Nixon to have risked escalation toward general nuclear war. The threatened use of tactical nuclear weapons makes diplomatic disagreements today seem quaint by comparison.

Burr and Kimball downplay the importance of the Nixon Doctrine, using the argument that neither Kissinger nor his staff was consulted in advance of Nixon’s informal comments at Guam during July 1969. However, just as Kissinger and his staff were nowhere to be seen at Camp David on August 15, 1971, this does not mean we should downplay the effect of that weekend on the Bretton Woods system. Neither should Kissinger’s absence from Guam negate his importance. Kissinger’s absence had more to do with Nixon’s penchant for surprise announcements. Furthermore, following the latest release of Nixon tapes in August 2013, there is now a total of twenty-three conversations that substantively discuss Nixon’s view of the Nixon Doctrine.[6] The quick takeaway from these conversations leaves me with the sense that the Nixon Doctrine was neither solely about Vietnam nor

a truly global doctrine--if such a thing is even possible--but somewhere in between. While Nixon and Kissinger cared about some parts of the world more than others, in these recordings Nixon himself provides examples of how the Nixon Doctrine was to have application to foreign policy with Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe.

The decent interval theory also deserves a more nuanced look, especially now that many more of Nixon's White House tapes are available for research. Until recently scholars have tended to use the Nixon tapes far too selectively to bolster particular viewpoints while ignoring evidence to the contrary. Based on my own work with the Nixon tapes that have touched on this subject, I would suggest that the picture is more complicated. Too much reliance on any single explanation can result in overly simplistic conclusions. There are days on the tapes that suggest that the decent interval theory does not adequately explain Nixon and Kissinger's frustrated attitude; at times they speak of desiring no interval at all other than the duration necessary to quickly withdraw troops and POWs. In addition, their thinking evolves over time. For example, following Nixon's groundbreaking visit to China during late February 1972, the tenor and content of their discussions seems much closer to support for the idea of a decent interval theory. But before then, Nixon and Kissinger's moods could swing wildly depending on how the war was going. Their feelings about the war revolved around--and responded to--the latest casualty figures, news media coverage, political polls, and reports from the field. Some days they were up and some days they were down.

But these critiques should not take away from the contribution that, yet again, William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball have made to our understanding of Nixon foreign policy. Well written and thoroughly researched, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter* is a rich study for scholars of the era, and essential for those interested in Vietnam, the Nixon era, and the mindset of our 37th president. With the release of additional Nixon White House records and tapes we can only hope that the authors continue writing, jointly or separately, for many more years.

#### Notes

[1]. See "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Madman Strategy during Vietnam War," The National Security Archive, May 29, 2015, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb517-Nixon-Kissinger-and-the-Madman-Strategy-during-V...>

[2]. Richard M. Nixon Notes, Box 1, July 7, 1968, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Stanford, CA.

[3]. David C. Geyer and Douglas E. Selvage, eds., *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: US Department of State), 90-97.

[4]. See William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Nuclear Ploy," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 59, no. 1 (2003): 28-40; and Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, "The Madman Nuclear Alert: Secrecy, Signaling, and Safety in October 1969," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 150-183. Richard A. Moss includes a useful summary in his 2009 George Washington University dissertation, "Behind the Backchannel: Achieving Détente in U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1969-1972."

[5]. For example, see James Rosen and Luke A. Nichter, "Madman in the White House," *Foreign*

Policy, March 25, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/25/madman-in-the-white-house/>.

[6]. A number of these tapes were not available when the authors previously wrote on the subject. For example, see Jeffrey Kimball, "The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 59-74. However, new works should be aware of newly released Nixon tapes. Other works that have expanded our understanding of the Nixon Doctrine as the National Archives has declassified more sources include Dan Caldwell, "The Legitimation of the Nixon-Kissinger Grand Design and Grand Strategy," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 4 (2009): 633-652; Luke A. Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Roham Alvandi, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The United States and Iran in the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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