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### Nichter on Mahan, 'Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. 32, SALT I, 1969-1972'

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### Comments

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## [Nichter on Mahan, 'Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. 32, SALT I, 1969-1972'](#)

Review published on Saturday, September 1, 2012

**Erin R. Mahan, ed.** *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. 32, SALT I, 1969-1972*. Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010. xxxiii + 1016 pp.; <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v32>. \$71.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-16-078401-9.

**Reviewed by** Luke A. Nichter (Texas A&M University-Central Texas) **Published on** H-Policy (September, 2012) **Commissioned by** Douglas J. Forsyth

Weighing in at 1,051 pages--typical by recent *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* standards, but still impressive--the publication of this volume marks yet another addition to the Office of the Historian's record of work on U.S.-Soviet relations. While five other volumes focus on bilateral relations between the two countries (volumes 12-16), not including another volume on arms control and nonproliferation (volume E-2), the volume under consideration here focuses on the process and results of the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks.[1] Known in shorthand as SALT I during the Nixon presidency, the negotiations documented in the volume culminated in the signing of the SALT agreement by Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev at the Moscow Summit in May 1972.

The volume is organized chronologically from the period before official talks began through the various stages of negotiations at Helsinki, Geneva, and Vienna. Along the way, the volume presents records relating to Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Moscow in April 1972, President Nixon's efforts to obtain congressional approval of the SALT agreement and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, and negotiations intended to produce a series of comprehensive arms control agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. The book culminates with the personal discussions between Nixon and Brezhnev at the Moscow Summit in May 1972, designed to limit the deployment of ballistic missiles and ABM systems.

Like most *FRUS* publications, the volume is impressively researched. It is based on work in not only the standard textual collections like the National Security Council (NSC) files, but also the Kissinger telcons, Nixon's White House tapes, Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence records, and Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and Department of Defense Records Groups located at less accessible facilities of the National Archives. The editors of the volume also had access to Kissinger's papers on deposit at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, access that continues to require his personal permission.[2] Despite the impressive research, the volume falls short of the same high standard when it comes to copyediting, due to several typos and a misspelling of Chief of Staff H. R. "Bob" Haldeman's name.

The declassification review process, which has been increasingly holding up the publication of *FRUS* volumes, lasted from 2004 to 2010 for this volume.[3] That is a staggering amount of time considering the result that only one document was withheld in full, although numerous other excisions also resulted. The growing delay to clear *FRUS* volumes for publication has meant that the Historian's Office has fallen even farther behind in its statutory requirement to publish *FRUS*

volumes thirty years after the events they document. The long-term result will be that unless modifications are made to the publishing or declassification review processes, the thirty-year rule will become almost meaningless once the Historian's Office is in the midst of the Ronald Reagan volumes a decade from now.

A hallmark of recent *FRUS* volumes, and one of the most valuable services provided by this volume, are the many transcripts of Nixon tapes, Kissinger telcons, and meetings between high-level American and Soviet officials. Placing so much of this content in the public domain within easy reach of researchers all but guarantees its use in countless research papers, theses, and dissertations. The Historian's Office should also be applauded for recently making so many *FRUS* volumes available electronically, even those that were initially released in printed format only. It is a great service to the discipline and future generations of historians, even more so once this digitization work is completed going back to the original *FRUS* volumes on the Lincoln administration.

One of the major drawbacks of studying documents presented in any *FRUS* volume is that they, by their very nature, represent more of what happened but not how it happened. Such records include the final drafts of meeting minutes, policy decisions already routed for approval, and memoranda censured of most indiscretions. However, records in this volume, such as the Kissinger telcons and Nixon tapes, permit readers to see a much rawer version of the policymaking process, sometimes shockingly raw for the uninitiated. Not only do these records help us to see more of the "how" of decision making, but they also allow us to see other options considered, which won out, and how policymakers reflected on decisions after the fact.

While most *FRUS* volumes are arranged around a single topic and related themes, a complexity of this volume is the extent to which it touches on so many subjects, including international finance, American bilateral relations with the Soviet Union and China, the Vietnam War, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and transatlantic relations, all subjects with their own dedicated *FRUS* volumes. Rather than following the silo approach used in many other *FRUS* volumes, the content covered here cuts across many topics.[4] When presenting a record of negotiations on a subject as complicated as SALT I, such complexity is unavoidable. However, there is only so much that can be squeezed into one volume, so a reader of this one may feel as though a review of the other *FRUS* volumes is required in order to gain the necessary background. Such a review would also come closer to replicating the contemporaneous process of negotiations that led to the SALT I agreement, in which all subjects were considered simultaneously, given the Nixon administration's preference for "linkage."

One challenge related to the SALT talks illuminated throughout this book was the consistently difficult duty of one representative of the United States to represent dozens of different individuals and government agencies, each with often different stakes in the outcome of the talks. Gerry Smith, chief of the American delegation and also director of ACDA, did an admirable job in difficult circumstances. The picture that emerges is of not only an administration that was intent on using all available resources to coerce enemies and allies alike, but also one whose leaders were pragmatic, diplomatic, and at times deceptive and even ruthless, when the situation called for it. While Smith played a critical role in the negotiations, the White House made it clear that it planned to take full credit for the outcome.

On dozens of occasions, we see the Nixon White House ensuring that Smith was advocating for Nixon's and Kissinger's latest position at the talks, and not some other proposal offered by the Pentagon or the State Department. Due to cases of honest disagreement, opportunities to lobby, and efforts at self-preservation, Smith was constantly confronted with a babel of voices and opinions regarding the negotiations options before him. There were also occasions when Smith himself was not in agreement with some aspect of the White House position--such as some aspect of the ABM Treaty--and he was quickly brought back into line (docs. 54, 142, 198, 240). There is plenty of uncharitable language and unflattering portraiture of Smith's work, if one knows where to look for it, on the Nixon tapes. It was this inherent difficulty of Smith's position that contributed to his eventual departure (doc. 328).

While other *FRUS* volumes have well-documented conflict in the relationship between Secretary of State William P. Rogers and National Security Advisor Kissinger, in this volume that relationship emerges as more nuanced. In part, this is because, rather than being a struggle between two people, the SALT negotiations involved many more top officials, due to the great impact they had on almost every corner of the Pentagon. We see President Nixon himself at times acting as a referee during the many squabbles that popped up not only between Rogers and Kissinger, but also between Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff Thomas Moorer (docs. 135, 150, 219, 235, 270, 328).

At times, Nixon used one aide to work around the others, in order to break a deadlock. The volume documents constant effort by Nixon to cobble together and keep together--and, sometimes, ride herd over--a coalition of advisors, so that the immediate next hurdle in the negotiations could be overcome, independently of the other hurdles. If not obvious already, we are dealing with a negotiating process far removed from that with which the Nixon administration typically was most comfortable. Rather than something that could be achieved by a secret trip by Kissinger, bilateral diplomacy between heads of state, or a back channel message, the complexity of negotiating in a multilateral forum with so many parties with different interests had the constant potential to overwhelm the administration's coordinating mechanisms. The store needed constant minding.

Another fascinating theme presented in this volume is the extent to which the participants documented in it felt that they were making history as each hurdle was cleared during the SALT talks. There was a concern for the personal legacies of those involved (doc. 51); for whether historians would eventually conclude that the United States had taken unnecessarily weak positions vis-à-vis the Soviets (docs. 25, 65); and for properly applying the lessons of history to policy decisions (doc. 69). Nixon and Kissinger, especially, also believed that in a country born in and shaped by war, it was an important and achievable goal to obtain peace between East and West by the 1976 bicentennial (doc. 296).

All in all, while there are no dramatic findings here, the volume adds substantially to our understanding of the texture of the relationship between East and West in the pursuit of arms limitation agreements. There is a lot for scholars to work with in this volume, and they will be citing these pages for many years to come. The remaining documents still to be declassified by the National Archives suggest that we stand to learn even more about this subject if and when they are released to the public.

## Notes

[1]. For a complete list of *FRUS* volumes that focus on the U.S.-Soviet relationship during the Nixon and Ford presidencies, see <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/nixon-ford>.

[2]. Although Kissinger's personal papers at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress remain officially closed, he does grant occasional access for a specified reason. For example, Kissinger recently granted Niall Ferguson extended access to his papers for his upcoming authorized biography and documentary. Some scholars have been critical of Kissinger for not making his papers more accessible, especially considering that many of the records were created during the course of his duties as a public official. In addition, numerous other top officials from the Nixon White House donated their papers to the Library of Congress--including Donald Rumsfeld, William Safire, Elliot Richardson, and Leonard Garment, among others--and these can be accessed freely without special arrangement. Kissinger has defended himself against such criticism, noting that the declassification review of papers in the Library of Congress is fraught with more complexity than the process used at the Nixon and Ford presidential libraries, where there are also significant collections of his official papers. This writer can attest to the fact that declassification review at the Library of Congress takes unusually long, even by the standards of presidential libraries and federal agencies in which one is accustomed to waiting years before records are declassified and made available to the public.

[3]. While not a scientific measurement, the declassification review process seems to be taking longer for recent Nixon-Ford volumes than it did for the volumes of prior presidencies.

[4]. The "silo" approach of many *FRUS* volumes is not meant to be a criticism of the process used to compile these volumes. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that each discrete volume is assigned a finite number of researchers, compilers, and editors. The Historian's Office staff assigned to one volume may not be--and are likely not--the same staff assigned to a related volume. The volume under consideration here would be stronger if it more frequently cross-referenced other related volumes. Such cross-referencing could include not just the various inputs that went into the SALT negotiations, but also the impact that the negotiations had on other policies. A reader could then see more easily where overlaps occur between volumes, and where to turn for more information on a related subject that may not be covered in the desired depth in this volume.

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=36781>

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