



Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War by William Burr and Jeffrey P. Kimball.

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Review by Jonathan M. House, US Army Command and General Staff College (j_house245@hotmail.com).

The standard narrative of the US withdrawal from the war in Vietnam focuses on the end-stage “Vietnamization” of the conflict. This condescending term, coined by Defense Secretary Melvin Laird in 1969, described American efforts to prepare Saigon’s armed forces, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), for the open-ended task of fighting both the regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Hanoi-backed insurgents in the south.¹ The purpose of this process was to allow the Nixon Administration to justify its unilateral withdrawal of American forces from the war zone while seeking a negotiated settlement with its Communist opponents. Unfortunately, once the United States reduced its bombing attacks and began to withdraw, Hanoi had little incentive to negotiate in earnest. Frustrated by a perceived deadlock in diplomacy, President Richard Nixon launched several major air campaigns, most notably operation LINEBACKER II in December 1972. Conventional wisdom holds that these strikes pressured Hanoi to sign the Paris Peace Accords (27 January 1973). Those agreements supposedly accelerated the release of American POWs but left a huge North Vietnamese military force inside South Vietnam, where it overthrew the Saigon regime twenty-seven months later.

This version the US withdrawal from Vietnam contains elements of truth, but portrays Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, as strangely passive in the years 1969–72. In *Nixon's Nuclear Specter*, two seasoned specialists in the subject attempt to fill this void. William Burr (George Washington Univ.) has worked hard for many years to identify and obtain relevant declassified documents from the Vietnam conflict, but, he admits, some key pieces of evidence remain heavily redacted or lost. His coauthor, Jeffrey Kimball (Miami Univ. of Ohio) has written several studies of the Nixon presidency and Vietnam.²

The authors stress President Nixon’s desire to use violent, kinetic actions—in today’s terms “shock and awe”—to startle and coerce the governments in Hanoi and Moscow into a compromise peace. The assumption was that what they call “Madman Diplomacy”—ostensible unpredictability and irrationality—would unsettle adversaries and make them more amenable to dealing with the United States. Nixon has a well-deserved reputation as secretive, combative, and given to extreme actions in both foreign and domestic policy; the authors contend that, quite apart from his own personality, the president deliberately cultivated this reputation as a bargaining position. During the Jordanian Black September crisis of 1970, for example, he explained to a journalist that “It is very important that we never create

1. James H. Willbanks has produced a series of superb studies of this period, most notably, *Abandoning Vietnam: How the U.S. Left and Saigon Lost Its War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2004). More recently, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen has revolutionized our understanding of America’s opponents in *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012). Neither of these accounts agrees with the simplified common wisdom described at the beginning of this review.

2. E.g., *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1998) and *To Reason Why: The Debate about the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War* (Philadelphia: Temple U Pr, 1990).

the impression with the Russians that the US will always act rationally. The real possibility of irrational American action is essential to the US/Soviet relationship” (329.)

Nixon's Nuclear Specter begins by surveying the theory and practice of nuclear threats from President Harry Truman's administration through President Lyndon Johnson's. A moment of particular importance occurred in 1953, when then Vice President Nixon witnessed what he considered to be a successful application of coercive diplomacy. The Eisenhower Administration believed the threat of tactical nuclear weapons had pushed China into accepting the armistice in Korea.³ Nixon concluded from this that threats of extreme actions could indeed bring opponents to diplomatic compromises. This accorded with the broader theory of escalating threats of violence, including the use of nuclear weapons, to resolve a crisis. Unsurprisingly, Henry Kissinger was a leading proponent of the theory.

Such diplomacy by intimidation was based on two dubious assumptions. First, Nixon and his advisors believed in a bipolar Cold War; they were convinced that the USSR had enormous leverage with Hanoi and other Communist governments. Kissinger spent years vainly demanding “linkage,” telling the Soviets that progress on arms limitation and other issues depended on greater cooperation by North Vietnam. Secondly, coercion theory assumed one's enemies would both detect and react to intelligence disinformation about possible threats, even (or especially) those never intended to be carried out.

In summer and fall 1969, Nixon and Kissinger contemplated two ways to secure Soviet and North Vietnamese cooperation. The first, operation DUCK HOOK, passionately advocated by Kissinger, was to mine North Vietnamese harbors and conduct massive bombing raids. Declassified sources show that the White House and Joint Staff planners even considered using nuclear weapons to destroy transportation routes on the China-North Vietnam border and the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Before executing DUCK HOOK, Nixon and Kissinger had the US Navy make undisguised preparations—moving mines from storage to forward positions, conducting aerial mine exercises, and so on. But, contrary to expectations, these feints triggered no enemy response. Ultimately, Nixon abandoned DUCK HOOK, citing doubts about its efficacy and concern for public reaction. In one of their book's principal conclusions, Burr and Kimball stress that the major antiwar demonstrations scheduled for fall 1969 deterred the president from a massive escalation of the war in Vietnam.

From 13 to 30 October 1969, Nixon and Kissinger turned to a more limited option—worldwide military alerts and vaguely menacing precautionary actions meant to alarm the Soviets. For instance, widespread “stand downs” of nuclear-armed aircraft hinted at increased ground-based maintenance of a sort that intelligence analysts associated with preparations for a major attack. In addition, two wings of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) sent bombers to forward, fail-safe locations, where they orbited on airborne alert for an extended period. The US Navy also diverted ships unexpectedly; they sailed under total emissions control as if deploying for war. From the German interzonal border to the shipping lanes of the Pacific, the Defense Department increased its intelligence collection and surveillance of Soviet units and ships. All these actions occurred in secret, with no formal change in defense condition (DEFCON) or public acknowledgement that anything unusual was underway.

Much to Kissinger's consternation, these prolonged and costly exercises accomplished no more than the DUCK HOOK preparatory gestures. Soviet and possibly Chinese military forces took precautions of their own, but Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin neither acknowledged that the USSR was

3. This interpretation has since fallen into question; see Rosemary J. Foot, “Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict,” *International Security* 13.3 (1988-89) 94-109, and Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2001) 109-15.

concerned by the alerts nor made any move to advance negotiations with Hanoi. This patently invalidated the hypothesis of Madman Diplomacy.

In reconstructing these events, the authors provide a wealth of detail about process. For example, Kissinger apparently compartmentalized discussions of the various options, so that few of his assistants knew the true scope or intent of the coercive tactics. Moreover, Nixon's attempt to use military gestures often rankled military professionals who were concerned to carry them out as effectively as possible and did not grasp their underlying diplomatic goals. When the Defense Department objected that the alerts conflicted with a scheduled exercise known as HIGH HEELS,

Kissinger exclaimed: "We really needed this, this week... Why is it that anytime you want something done, the military have 50 bureaucratic reasons why it can't be done?" Not taking no for an answer, the White House prepared to push back. The next morning, Tuesday, 14 October, [Kissinger's military assistant, Brig. Gen. Alexander] Haig stopped by the Pentagon to investigate and then met with Kissinger at the White House to prepare for their meeting with Laird. Haig reviewed with Kissinger the controversy over HIGH HEELS, concerns over informing allies, and Pentagon inaction on SAC dispersal [of bombers] and surveillance of Soviet shipping. On these issues, Haig argued, Laird's objections were "not overriding." ... Haig believed that "it was necessary to have the measures completed sufficiently before 3 November [scheduled for a Nixon speech on the war] for the president to ascertain beyond a doubt whether or not the signals had been effective." In other words, before giving his speech, Nixon wanted to know whether the alert had made an impression on Moscow concerning Vietnam. (277)

Ultimately, the Nixon Administration turned to the "long road" of troop withdrawals, Vietnamization, and negotiations. Nixon and Kissinger frankly, if privately, acknowledged that they hoped only to achieve a "decent interval" between US withdrawal and South Vietnamese collapse. The authors maintain that the bombing campaign known as operation LINEBACKER II was intended not to expedite peace negotiations but to satisfy Nixon's combative instincts and to make another foray into Madman Diplomacy. The real purpose of the bombing was to reassure the Saigon government and warn both Hanoi and Moscow that the United States would use air attacks in the event of future confrontations in Vietnam—a threat impossible to fulfill.

The authors construct a powerful argument, thanks to their masterful blending of memoir literature and historical documentation (however incomplete). They acknowledge the paucity of available records of enemy responses to the military gestures conducted in 1969, but anyone familiar with the inconclusive intelligence data will agree that Burr and Kimball, like Nixon and Kissinger before them, were striving for a rarely attainable degree of certainty about enemy intentions.

The book's conclusion tracks Nixon and Kissinger's efforts to apply coercive threats after 1969, most famously in October 1973, when Kissinger elevated the US alert posture to DEFCON 3 to forestall Soviet actions during the Yom Kippur War. Assuming the authors are correct about the repeated failure of such ploys in 1969, one wonders whether the president and his advisor were in denial about the abject failure of Madman Diplomacy.

William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball deserve praise for their discerning and cogent reconstruction of the motives and actions of the Nixon Administration in its first year. Students interested in the Vietnam War or the Cold War more generally will learn a great deal from *Nixon's Nuclear Specter*.