

H-Diplo

H-Diplo FRUS Reviews

h-diplo.org/FRUS/

Response to Review No. 21

Published on 17 April 2013

Reissued, 9 June 2014

H-Diplo FRUS Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and
Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Response to Pierre Asselin review on John M. Carland, ed. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976: Volume IX: Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2010

Stable URL: <http://h-diplo.org/FRUS/PDF/FRUS21-Response.pdf>

[Original Review located at <http://h-diplo.org/FRUS/PDF/FRUS21.pdf>

Response by **Jeffrey P. Kimball, professor emeritus, Miami University**

In his 17 April 2013 review of *Foreign Relations of the United States: Vietnam*, Vol. IX, Oct. 1972-Jan. 1973, edited by John Carland, Professor Pierre Asselin discusses the decent-interval question, the Paris agreement of 1973, and the effect of Linebacker bombing on the agreement. In the process, he cites one of my publications, taking issue with what he claims I had written about these topics. In doing so, he made several misstatements about my words and the history of the war.

In this post, I will focus on the issue of the decent-interval policy and perhaps write about the other two issues in subsequent posts. I will focus on the decent-interval question not because I consider it more important than the others, but because it is a more complex issue. In a phrase, and as two Kissinger aides put it, it was a secret policy option that aimed at bringing about a “fake peace”¹ that was kept secret from the public, Congress, and many in the executive branch. Referring to the option, Nixon and Kissinger used such terms as “decent interval,” “healthy interval,” “suitable interval,” and “reasonable interval” in select oral conversations or in private and secret papers, many of which have since been declassified. In most of these conversations and state papers they used oblique diplomatic language, which must be deciphered in the context in which it appears; for example, phrases such as this one from a 1971 document: “We will abide by the outcome of the political process agreed upon.”² In part because of secrecy and coded language, there has been confusion in the historiography what exactly the decent-interval policy was.

¹ “Vietnam Policy Alternatives,” 5 August 1969, enclosed with Memo, Morton Halperin to Henry Kissinger, 5 August 1969, folder: Misc. Materials—Selected Lord Memos, Director’s Files (Winston Lord), 1969-77, Department of State Central Files, Record Group 59, NARA.

² Background book, July 1971, folder: POLO I, box 850, National Security Council Files (Winston Lord)—China Trip/Vietnam, Nixon Presidential Library.

In any case, it seems that some practitioners and readers of Vietnam War history do not accept the argument that Nixon and Kissinger pursued such a policy option. The topic was, for example, entirely absent from Professor Asselin's book, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (2002), which I pointed out in a review of the book in the November 2003 issue of the journal *Diplomatic History*.³ His review of my book, *The Vietnam War Files* (2004), in which I reproduced abundant evidence about the policy drawn from recently declassified evidence consisting of textual documents and taped White House conversations, followed this pattern.⁴ The review did not engage the evidence, except for dismissive remarks regarding only two of approximately two dozen documents and tapes I excerpted for the book and placed in the historical context of the evolution of Nixinger policy.⁵

Either one of the two documents that were dismissed in the review were, in my opinion and that of William Hammond,⁶ proof enough of the likelihood that Nixon and Kissinger at some point sought a decent-interval solution to their Vietnam problem. But we have more than two documents; we have many, and among them are paper documents and taped records of very private conversations between Nixon and Kissinger. In addition, I have taped testimony from two of Kissinger's aides to the effect that within the White House National Security Council (NSC) the question of the decent-interval was "in the air" from early on.⁷ Daniel Ellsberg talked with Kissinger about the option in 1968. Kissinger himself has recently conceded points that he has previously denied.⁸ Moreover, the evidence meets the tests of historical proof: the different pieces cohere logically and factually with one another and correspond to the visible historical events we have observed and the hidden history we have discovered.

³ Kimball, "Fighting and Talking," *Diplomatic History* 27, 5 (November 2003): 763-766.

⁴ Asselin, "Kimball's Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History* 30, 1 (January 2006): 163-167. (A good title, I give him that.)

⁵ Citing Jussi Hanhimäki, however, he allows that Nixon and Kissinger may have used the decent-interval idea to lever cooperation from Beijing in persuading Hanoi to settle the Vietnam war. It is true that Kissinger tried to win Moscow's and Beijing's cooperation in this way, but it is also true that the administration was serious about following through on the decent-interval option in Vietnam. Moreover, on many occasions, Kissinger extended the offer directly to Le Duc Tho and other North Vietnamese negotiators, but with the Chinese, Soviets, and Vietnamese he always discussed it in oblique diplomatic language, which Beijing, Moscow, and Hanoi did not fully understand and which, in any case, did not meet Hanoi's policy needs and goals.

⁶ Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 522; and Hammond e-mail to Kimball, ca. 2004.

⁷ Kimball telephone interviews with Anthony Lake and Roger Morris, 9 December 2005 and 21 April 2007.

⁸ See, Kimball, "Vietnam War Nixonography," *Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review* 43, 3 (January 2013): 28.

I am unaware of any primary evidence to the contrary having been produced by historians or others who have questioned the decent-interval thesis, and I have not myself come across contrary evidence in my own researches—except for Nixon’s and Kissinger’s public denials. I believe it incumbent on me to be open to such evidence should I come across it, but I also believe it necessary for those who reject the decent-interval thesis to produce such evidence and to engage and directly refute the evidence in a systematic and scholarly manner that I, Ken Hughes, Jussi Hanhimäki, and others⁹ have supplied regarding the decent-interval policy. As syndicated columnist Hal Crowther said about another topic some years ago: “Journalists [and historians] used to look for the smoking gun, but this time we have the cannons of Waterloo, we have Gettysburg and Sevastopol. We have enough gun smoke to cause asthma in heaven. I’m overwhelmed.”¹⁰

Asselin’s skeptical commentary about the decent-interval policy continues in his review of Carland’s *FRUS: Vietnam*, Vol. IX. His review begins by setting up a straw-man argument that misrepresents one of the many passages on the topic in my 1998 book *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (240). He writes:

“The documents in the volume [*FRUS: Vietnam*, vol. IX] dispel another argument advanced by Kimball: the ‘decent-interval’ solution according to which Nixon wanted nothing more from a peace agreement than to ‘countenance’ Thieu’s inevitable demise after ‘an appropriately extended period following American withdrawal’.”

The paragraph in *Nixon’s Vietnam War* from which Asselin excerpted these particular clauses is in chapter 10 and follows a page-and-a half of background information and analysis on Nixingerian polices during November-December 1970 (not to mention the pages and chapters that came before and after these). My full paragraph and part of the next reads:

“Implicit in their calculations was their acceptance, at last, of the decent-interval solution, for with the departure of American combat troops near the end of 1972, there could be no guarantees that Thieu’s government would survive permanently. They now seemed prepared to countenance his demise, as long as it would take place after an appropriately extended period following American withdrawal, thereby salvaging American credibility and Nixon’s honor.

“They had not, however, abandoned the hope that Thieu could survive into the indefinite future, and in any case, the administration would try to provide enough of a margin of safety so that his collapse, if it came, would not be sudden. . . .”¹¹

⁹ For selected references, see *ibid* 28-29, 32; and Kimball, “The Vietnam War,” chapter 21 of *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon*, ed. Melvin Small (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 388-389, 394.

¹⁰ *Durham Independent Weekly*, 12 May 2004.

¹¹ *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 240.

My analysis, as I look back at it, was cautious and nuanced. I did not say, moreover, that Nixon and Kissinger wanted “nothing more” than a decent-interval settlement. I implied in these paragraphs and suggested elsewhere in the book that it was one option of several—an option which eventually played out to the bitter end in response to the circumstances of the war, the negotiations, and the domestic and international scene.

Most of the clipped quotes Asselin cites from *FRUS: Vietnam*, Vol. IX to refute the decent-interval thesis actually support the argument for it; namely, while Nixon wanted South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to approve or go along with the agreement that Kissinger would negotiate with Nixon’s approval, he and Kissinger were prepared to sign an agreement whether it was one that Thieu liked or not. This, in fact, is what happened in January 1973. Indeed, Nixon sent Thieu threatening letters to persuade him to cooperate. When Thieu ignored Nixon’s entreaties and warnings, Nixon simply went ahead with the signing of the agreement, leaving Thieu with no other choice. I document this process in *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, as have others.

Another point to keep in mind is that the volume under review, like vol. VIII before it, does not include most of the documents and transcribed tapes that bear on the decent-interval question. Asselin thus cannot credibly appeal to “the documents in this volume” as proof against the decent-interval thesis.¹²

Yes, of course, Nixon wanted an “honorable” peace, but for political reasons at home and to protect US “credibility” abroad. In the end, the honor he salvaged for his presidency and U.S. policy from the Paris agreement was made possible by the passing of a suitable interval of a little more than two years between the late-January 1973 agreement and the late-April 1975 fall of Saigon. That was the whole point of the policy: salvaging a particular kind of honor and credibility in the face of defeat. And by defeat I mean the defeat of the original U.S. policy in Vietnam, which was to preserve the Saigon government in a settlement that would bring about a divided Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger had also striven to preserve their honor and credibility through the historical fiction of having achieved an agreement that secured the Saigon government. But there is ample public and private documentation that they privately believed Saigon’s fall was likely. One of many examples: the British ambassador to Washington reported in July 1972 that “K no longer believes that, if and when the United States withdrew . . . , Saigon would necessarily pass under Communist control more or less immediately. This might happen in the end, but perhaps not for some time—and before that the United States would have pulled out in an honorable fashion.”¹³

¹²See, e.g., Kimball, “Sticks and Carrots, Fighting and Talking, Stalemate and Compromise,” review of John M. Carland, ed. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976: Vietnam, January-October 1972, Volume VIII*. (Washington, DC: United States Government Publication Office, June 2010), H-Diplo, 23 November 2011, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/FRUS/PDF/FRUS5.pdf>

¹³MemCon, George Baring, Burke Trend, and Kissinger, 28 July 1972, subj: Discussions with Dr. Kissinger at Washington, Prime Minister’s Office 15/1362, National Archives, UK.

I had addressed the decent-interval issue in *Nixon's Vietnam War* because I was familiar with the historiography of war, in which the decent-interval question had come up. I thought it professionally appropriate and necessary to take up the matter, even though I did not know very much about it in the beginning and therefore had no preconceptions. If there was any contested issue of prime interest to me, besides trying to figure out what happened and why during this period of the war, it was the madman theory. (Asselin's 2006 review also dismissed the evidence I gathered about that issue.)

My understanding of the decent-interval option has evolved. In *The Vietnam War Files* I submitted considerably more documentary and taped evidence than in the earlier *Nixon's Vietnam War*. In both books, however, I argued that Nixon and Kissinger began to implement the decent-interval solution between late 1970 and early 1971. I have collected additional evidence about the policy and incorporated some of this material in articles I have published since finishing the *Vietnam War Files* manuscript in 2003.¹⁴ I plan to write an article-length analysis of the policy in the near future.

What was not clear to me in 2004 was the extent to which the policy was part of what Nixon and Kissinger called their "game plan" at the outset of the administration. New evidence and further thought on the subject persuades me that the decent-interval option was one of several other options but also a fundamental part of the administration's game plan. It evolved from its early form of providing Thieu with a "decent chance" to survive for at least five years following a negotiated settlement to an unlikely chance of surviving for a period of one or three years. As a key policy option of the administration, it shaped the administration's direction of the war and helped prolong it. It also allowed Nixon and Kissinger to blame others for the policy defeat of the United States in Vietnam, leaving a political legacy that subsequently haunted American society.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

¹⁴See, e.g.: "The U.S. Exit from Vietnam: Lessons for Afghanistan?," chapter 2 in *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan*, ed. Steven R. Corman (Tempe AZ: Center for Strategic Communication, 2013); "Out of Primordial Cultural Ooze: Inventing Political and Policy Legacies about the U.S. Exit from Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 34, 3 (June 2010): 577-587; "Decent Interval or Not? The Paris Agreement and the End of the Vietnam War," *Passport* 34.3 (December 2003): 26-31. This last article includes an appendix of documentary excerpts.