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Review by Thomas A. Schwartz, Vanderbilt University

For reasons perhaps known best to its screenwriters, the recently-released movie *Men in Black III* decided to have its characters travel back in time to the year 1969.

Although famous for the Apollo moon landing, Charles Manson, and the Mets World Series victory, among historians 1969 tends to live in the shadow of its more famous – or infamous, depending on your point of view – predecessor, 1968, the year of the Tet Offensive, political assassinations, and the worldwide revolutionary upheaval of young people.¹ But if this impressive collection of documents compiled by the State Department historians Todd Bennett and Edward Keefer tells us anything, it is that 1969 was a true turning point in the direction of American foreign policy. Richard Nixon, the anti-communist Cold Warrior, faced a fundamentally different strategic world from the one he had known as Dwight Eisenhower's Vice-President, leading him to remark at an NSC meeting in February 1969, "Our bargaining position has shifted. We must face facts." (21).

The facts were, as Nixon learned, that the United States now had "significant vulnerabilities" because of the Soviet Union's continuing and determined buildup of its ICBM forces since the early 1960s. As Nixon's NSC briefer put it, in a reference to the Cuban Missile crisis of October 1962, "During Cuba: We could win under any circumstances....But picture has changed.... They are now ahead or equal" (8-9). To Nixon, this was an "astounding" development and could not fail to have foreign policy implications. Soviet confidence would increase, as would the "aggressiveness of their foreign policy." (10, 19) Extended deterrence, the nuclear umbrella the United States had once held over Europe, was "a lot of crap," (25) and flexible response, its corollary, was

¹ For a great example of this focus on 1968, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

“baloney” (20). Compared to the 1950s, when massive retaliation guided U.S. policy, there was now, in Nixon’s view, a genuine “balance of terror.” (19) America, for the first time in its recent history, faced a truly powerful and equal rival.

The psychological impact of nuclear parity on American leaders, and the overall effect this had on American foreign policy under the Nixon Administration, were two of the themes explored when this volume of the Foreign Relations series was discussed at a conference at Williams College in early March 2012.² However, unlike the other volume under consideration, the account of the SALT I negotiations, this National Security Policy volume covers a wide variety and range of topics, from discussions of nuclear weapons, strategic doctrine, the Chemical and Biological Weapons issue, and the Safeguard ABM system to the creation of the Volunteer Army and the pulling and overhauling of the Defense budget. The volume also includes an extended discussion of the October 1969 Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, a nuclear alert designed to intimidate the Soviets and North Vietnamese into a Vietnam settlement which is considered by some an example of Nixon’s “madman” theory. Because of this cornucopia of topics and issues, historians need to pay extra attention to find some of the gems contained in this volume. And there is much here for historians, not only for what these documents tell us about the Nixon Presidency, but also the way the American government coped with the perceived decline in its international power and influence. This latter point certainly contains implications for our understanding of contemporary American foreign policy as well as that of the Nixon era.

Nixon wrote in his memoirs that he recognized in 1969 that the United States could no longer pursue the nuclear superiority it had enjoyed in the past, and that “consequently at the beginning of the administration I began to talk in terms of *sufficiency* rather than *superiority* to describe our goals for the nuclear arsenal.”³ Even while moving in this rhetorical direction, Nixon made an early decision to fight hard for an Anti-Ballistic Missile system, the ABM. His political advisers told him in March 1969 that the ABM would lose in the Senate unless there was “all-out Presidential involvement” (73). Ironically enough, given the subsequent Nixon opening toward China, Nixon was partially persuaded to support the ABM by the possible threat posed by a Chinese attack. He noted in March 1969 that “statements by some Chicom leaders indicate relatively little concern for human life and *increase* in risk of irrational action” (67). But Nixon also wanted the ABM because he believed America needed to keep pace with the Soviets, possess a potential bargaining chip in arms control negotiations, and demonstrate to the world – and to his domestic supporters – American resolve and credibility. He was not persuaded by the argument of his domestic adviser, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, that “a ‘dovish’ move on ABM might buy him more time on Vietnam, since ‘there is a strong association between those issues in public opinion of the moment’ (74). Nixon’s efforts did prove successful, if only by the

² Interested readers can view parts of the conference on the Williams College YouTube channel, <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC9BA196B0BD1E88F&feature=plcp>

³ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), p. 415. It is a reflection of how scrupulous the editors have been that they footnote this same point.

narrowest margin in the Senate, and he then insisted to his advisers that they get the story out that “the ABM victory was a result and reflection of the ‘Nixon Style’” (88).

The struggle for the ABM was also connected with American estimates of Soviet missile development during this period, and the editors include considerable material on the debate over the Soviet SS-9 missile. Whether the SS-9 had a MIRV capability – the ability to deliver multiple-independently-targeted warheads – found the intelligence community at odds with a White House and Defense Department which wanted to believe that “there is positive technical evidence that the Soviets either have a MIRV system capable of attacking Minuteman or are making significant progress toward achieving one.” (119) Kissinger would admit later that the CIA had gotten this one right, but it is clear that the SS-9 became an important part of the rationale for moving ahead with the ABM program as well as the MIRV program for American missiles. This escalation of the arms race was accompanied by an attempt by National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to re-think the nuclear war planning - the SIOP or Single Integrated Operational Plan - to allow greater flexibility, including the possibility of using nuclear weapons for coercive diplomacy. Kissinger, whose book on limited nuclear war in the 1950s first established him as a ‘defense intellectual,’ frequently invoked his own experience from that time period. William Burr, the leading expert on the nuclear weapons planning during the Nixon years, offered one of the few criticisms of this FRUS volume at the Williams Conference, noting that it left out a number of documents dealing with Kissinger’s struggle with Secretary of Defense Melvyn Laird and the Defense Department over this issue.⁴

Although there may be gaps on the debate over the SIOP, the treatment of the “JCS Readiness test” or nuclear alert of October 1969 is among the fascinating parts of the volume. It also elicits from the State Department historians their own candid confession that the “documentary record offers no definitive explanation as to why U.S. forces went on this alert” (232). To the best of my knowledge, this is one of the first times that the FRUS editors have been as direct in acknowledging such a lacuna in the record, an admission which is suggestive of the degree of secrecy with which the Nixon White House operated. But because of the significance of the issue in the historiography, the editors proceed to offer two possible explanations for the alert. The first is the more commonly accepted argument that the alert was part of Operation Duck Hook, Nixon’s attempt to threaten both North Vietnam and Moscow with military escalation and even a nuclear attack if there were no settlement or serious peace talks by November 1969, the year anniversary of Lyndon Johnson’s bombing halt.⁵ The second explanation is that the alert was a signal to the Soviets to deter any possible attack on China, a possibility that had grown more likely after

⁴ William Burr, “‘To Have the Only Option That of Killing 80 Million People is the Height of Immorality,’ The Nixon Administration, the SIOP, and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969-1974,” <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/> See also Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of U.S. Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁵ See especially William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, “Nixon’s Nuclear Ploy,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist* 59, 1 (January/February, 2003), pp. 28-37, 72-73 and Scott D. Sagan and Jeremi Suri, “The Madman Nuclear Alert,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 150-183.

border conflicts erupted between the two communist giants. The evidence the editors provide for both is fascinating, including memoranda recounting the efforts of Soviet diplomats to find out America's likely reaction to an attack on China, and material from the H.R. Haldeman Diary recounting Kissinger's hope that the readiness exercise would "jar Soviets and NVN" and lead to a "big break" in the war. (284) (Curiously enough, an editorial note in the volume reports that Nixon rejected Duck Hook in mid-October but does not mention the possible impact of the massive antiwar demonstrations of the Vietnam moratorium on October 15.) My own judgment is that the preponderance of evidence indicates that the readiness exercise was designed to pressure Moscow and the North Vietnamese, something that seems clear from Nixon and Kissinger's interactions with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. But the fact that the exercise also coincided with the possibility of a Soviet pre-emptive strike against China makes one wonder if October 1969 wasn't one of the most dangerous times in the Cold War, even though the CIA concluded that "there has been no reflection of acute concern by the Soviets" in reaction (293).

The discussion of the creation of the All-Volunteer Army is another hallmark of this volume. Perhaps because of the success of America's military in recent years, a success particularly in the prestige and respect it now enjoys with the American public, historians have neglected the extraordinary weakness and almost complete disarray of the American Army during this period. It is not too much to say that the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, coupled with the societal and racial polarization of the era, was destroying the very basis of the armed forces. Beth Bailey's superb study, which chronicles the creation of the volunteer force from Richard Nixon's campaign promise in October 1968 up to the present day, makes it clear that the volunteer force faced substantial political opposition along the way.⁶ Early in the Administration, Laird warned Nixon that, "there are many Americans, including some in Congress, who reject the idea of an All-Volunteer Armed Force but support reduced reliance on the draft. It will be easier to reach your objective by focusing public attention on eliminating the draft rather than stirring those who object to an All-Volunteer Force" (470). Secretary of State William Rogers also cautioned that a precipitous end to the draft would have a negative effect on America's European Allies, leading them to "trim back their own conscription requirements" (501). There were also worries that it would fit into a larger picture of American decline, and weaken American credibility. More prosaically, the high costs of a volunteer force in the midst of a political climate which demanded deep defense cuts, was also a particularly important concern. Nixon, however, was determined to end the draft eventually, although he worried that if Congress voted against a draft extension through 1971, "the effect on foreign policy of having no draft at all will be terrible" (494). Nixon also indulged his penchant for ethnic stereotypes. Told by the Director of Selective Service, Curtis Tarr, that Washington State had "84 no-shows for every 100" potential draftees, Nixon remarked, "that is because of all those Swedes there" (494).

⁶ Beth Bailey, *America's Army: Making the All-Volunteer Force* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

The debate over the volunteer army was a part of the larger dilemma which Nixon faced, the broadly-felt public and congressional desire to cut defense spending drastically in the wake of the Vietnam War and the economic recession of 1969 and 1970, in the hope of yielding a 'peace dividend,' which could be used to address domestic problems such as the urban crisis. (Nixon's Budget Director – and later Reagan's Secretary of Defense - Caspar Weinberger put it bluntly in a manner pleasing to Nixon when he said "none of this urban crap that seems to be popular is going to do any good if our borders are not secure.") (998) But although Nixon fought for the ABM and continually stressed the need to maintain America's military strength, he was not completely averse to making cuts in the military. With the benefit of the White House taping mechanism, we can listen to Nixon praise Kissinger to his advisers for having taken the "Defense Department and shaken it up." But the President also denounced the military services for playing the "same old shell game..... the sons of bitches sit down there [and say] 'Well gee whiz, I can't get rid of these wings, and the Army's going to be all mad if they don't have these nice slots and so forth.'" Nixon maintained that "never has a country spent more for less defense than the United States." In his own words, "we don't need these goddamn air wings up there. We don't need all those flyboys flying around. We don't need those Air Force generals. We're going to get rid of them... And we're going to get rid of some of this ground stuff. And we're going to get rid of some of the Navy crap too" (785). The problem was that his tirade went up against a Pentagon fully prepared to resist his efforts, as Kissinger explained that whatever ceiling the Administration set for expenditures, the three services would just "slice it three ways" (787).

Of course Nixon also worried about the domestic politics of defense cuts. He complained that "our very good right wing friends are yakking their heads off about our defense budget not being adequate," and yet Nixon believed they had not helped him fight the battle for ABM or against the Mansfield amendment calling for troop reductions in Europe. (878) "The general trend," he told Kissinger 'insofar as support for defense is down.'" (878) But Nixon thought that could change. Recalling how Kennedy had campaigned against him on a nonexistent "missile gap," Nixon worried that "people just want to be able to scare the bejesus out of people." Nixon wanted a budget number "that could defuse the domestic opposition." (878) In another classic Nixon formulation, he explained that "If there is a hell of a lot domestic opposition expressed, that will have a very detrimental effect on the attitudes of the Russians and the Chinese too because if they hear American television and so forth and the Senate saying the United States is bare-assed for an attack, they are going to believe it, right?" (878-879) Nixon's crudely expressed fear of American vulnerability led him to tread more carefully than he might have in pursuing defense cuts, pushing unsuccessfully to get Defense Secretary Laird to give him a list "of those cuts which he would consider would be *least* damaging to our security" (953).

No volume in the *Foreign Relations* series can be read in isolation, and this certainly applies to this volume on National Security Policy. It provides a context for understanding many of the policies and initiatives of the Administration, from its search for détente with the Soviet Union, the opening to China, the promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine, and the attempts to bring the war in Vietnam to an end. At the Williams Conference, one of the central debates which took place concerned how to evaluate these years of the Nixon Presidency. Were

they, in fact, years of real change, as the Cold War seemed to come to an end and America moved away from an ideological foreign policy toward a more realist-driven and limited policy? Or did they signify that American leaders remained fully committed to the Cold War, but needed to find new ways to wage it? As our current leaders struggle with defining American foreign policy in a similarly challenging foreign and domestic environment, we can see similar patterns emerge which will no doubt keep us debating these same issues for the foreseeable future.

Thomas Alan Schwartz is a Professor of History and Political Science at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of the books *America's Germany: John J. McCloy and the Federal Republic of Germany* (1991) and *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (2003), and with Matthias Schulz, the edited volume, *The Strained Alliance: US-European Relations in the 1970s*, (2009). He is currently working on a biography of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger entitled *Henry Kissinger and the Dilemmas of American Power*.

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