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Reviewed by **Suzanne C. Nielsen, U.S. Military Academy**¹

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According to one of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's successors, James Schlesinger, "The list of secretarial responsibilities is so imposing that no single individual can totally fulfill them all."² Given the challenges inherent in the role, Laird was remarkably successful at establishing priorities for his tenure, attaining his key goals, and leaving office on his own terms.

As Richard Hunt explains in his carefully researched addition to the Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military, 1969-1973*, Laird was a reluctant nominee for the position. As President Richard Nixon pressed his case, Laird only agreed to serve after Nixon accepted his condition that he would have the autonomy to make civilian and military appointments within the Department of Defense and after stipulating that he would serve only four years in the position (6). Laird also entered office with a relatively clear set of priorities, informed by a congressional career during which defense had been one of his areas of focus. These priorities included his desire to "wind down the war" in Vietnam, end the draft, and repair the somewhat fractured relations between the Office of Secretary of Defense and the services by exercising more "participatory management" (8).

One of the strengths of this volume is its portrait of national security decision making in the Nixon Administration from the perspective of a cabinet level officer who had to contend with Nixon's tendency toward centralization and secrecy, and who on key issues nevertheless proved able to hold his own. Perhaps

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.

² James Schlesinger, "The Office of Secretary of Defense," in Robert J. Art, Vincent Davis, Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Reorganizing America's Defense: Leadership in War and Peace* (Washington, DC: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985), 262, as cited in Charles A. Stevenson, *The Nearly Impossible Job of Secretary of Defense* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 3.

the best examples here relate to the Vietnam War and the defense budget. On the Vietnam War, Nixon, his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and Laird “shared the same goal of ending the war, but disagreed over how to get there” (90). Nixon and Kissinger sought to calibrate force withdrawals and military activity with an eye on leverage in international negotiations and an “honorable” final settlement that would preserve the strategic position of the United States abroad (89). Laird, however, with a focus on the domestic political and economic context, was a consistent advocate for steady withdrawals. As Hunt details, “Laird’s skillful manipulation of the levers of power (the budget, Congress, draft calls, military strategy and operations, rate of withdrawal of forces from Vietnam) forced Nixon and Kissinger to grudgingly accept Laird’s position on troop withdrawals. It seems clear in hindsight that Laird was convinced that there could be no detours or slowdowns in seeking to end U.S. combat in Vietnam” (90).

Even with the benefit of hindsight, it is difficult to assess the strategic costs and benefits created by Laird’s successful maneuvering for steady U.S. force withdrawals. In retrospect, it is not clear that even the highest feasible level of U.S. financial and military investment throughout the Nixon Administration could have enabled South Vietnam to survive as an independent state. It is even less certain that the use of additional force for the primary purpose of influencing North Vietnam’s position at peace negotiations would have had the desired effect. If the war was not winnable, or if North Vietnam was relatively insensitive to temporary increases in the losses it suffered in the war, then Laird at least managed to limit its costs in dollars and lives.

A second example relates to the defense budget. With Nixon’s approval, Kissinger created a Defense Program Review Committee (DPRC) that he chaired and which included interagency representatives at the deputy and undersecretary level. His intent was that this body would evaluate: “the ‘diplomatic, military and political consequences’ of changes in the Defense budget and programs, U.S. overseas force deployments, tactical nuclear weapons deployments, and policy and program issues raised by [National Security Study Memorandums]” (45). While Laird believed it appropriate for the DPRC to look at trade-offs between defense spending and other national priorities, he rejected the intrusion into internal Department of Defense budget decision-making processes that was implied by Kissinger’s ambitions for the body (46). Hunt makes a compelling case that Laird, throughout his four years as Secretary, used “delaying tactics” and “incomplete responses” to prevent the DPRC from acquiring “real authority over the formulation of the Defense budget” (548-549).

While Laird held his own in key policy areas, mutual distrust created problematic civil-military dynamics. On several occasions, including during the planning of military operations from Vietnam into Cambodia in 1970, Nixon and Kissinger set up a backchannel with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and deliberately excluded Laird from operational planning (159). Similarly, during North Vietnam’s Easter Offensive in 1972, the White House set up a backchannel with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer and also with General Creighton Abrams, then in command in Vietnam (226-227). To some extent, these arrangements could be seen as an effort by a frustrated president to bypass a secretary with divergent views. However, they created a dangerous potential for the stove piping of important decisions that would have benefitted from broader vetting and which threatened the integrity of the chain of command.

A second strength of this volume is its comprehensive review of the key issues faced by Laird in the tumultuous years of 1969-1972 (2).³ Although the Vietnam War and the transition to an all-volunteer force

³ As the author notes in the preface, one issue that is not discussed is Laird’s role in dealing with the issue of prisoners of war, as it is ably covered in two other volumes published by the Historical Office of the Office of the

were central challenges, there are also detailed chapters on each budget year during his tenure, the U.S. commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, changing security dynamics in East Asia, anti-ballistic missile defense and arms control, foreign military assistance, and the impact of social issues on the U.S. military. In his management of these challenges, Laird's knowledge of Congress and his investments in his relationships on Capitol Hill were critical to his success in advancing the agendas of the Department of Defense and the Nixon Administration. A politician by background, he was involved in Nixon's reelection campaign of 1972, "not only making political points for Nixon but helping gain public and congressional support for his budget" (461).

While this volume has many strengths, Laird's external relationships with the White House and with Congress receive much stronger coverage than the civil-military relations of his tenure. One of Laird's principal objectives was to adopt a "participatory management" style that would increase the voice of senior military leaders in defense planning. While Hunt does explain the changes that Laird made to the Office of Systems Analysis, which was a key source of the tensions during the tenure of Secretary Robert McNamara (15-18), there is sparse coverage of Laird's relationships with senior military leaders. Even as Hunt describes the occasional involvement of senior military leaders in the tensions between Laird and the White House, he shares little that would give use a sense of Laird's relationships with the Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the service chiefs, or his military commanders in Vietnam. This is even true of Laird's interactions with General Abrams, who was nominated by Nixon to become Army Chief of Staff only after Laird advocated on Abrams's behalf (232-233). The reason for Laird's confidence in Abrams is left unexplained.

This volume also has almost nothing to say about developments within the military services – the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines – during this time period. Undoubtedly, Laird did much to lay the foundation for the post-Vietnam military through his efforts to minimize cuts to the defense budget, his advocacy for "total force planning" that would integrate the reserve components, his efforts to address social issues such as racial tensions, drug abuse, and the roles available to women, and his advocacy for the all-volunteer force. Nevertheless, changes within the services would also be necessary to the rebuilding of the post-Vietnam military, and indeed, many were underway. In the Army, for example, Laird's tenure saw key developments in personnel management, education, and training on which future reforms would continue to build. While these omissions are not necessarily a shortcoming of the volume, they do speak to the critical importance of strong military and civilian leadership at the level of the services in the creation of an effective force.

Hunt ends the volume on a fitting note. When Laird left office after four years, as he had intended from the beginning, he had been successful in extracting the U.S. military from Vietnam and in many of his efforts to posture the Department of Defense for the future. However, the Vietnam legacy must remain mixed. As Hunt explains: "In most areas of his tenure as secretary, Laird's political focus served him well, but less so in regard to Vietnam. He helped end U.S. involvement there, but not the rancorous disagreements throughout the nation about the U.S. government's involvement in the divisive, costly war" (557).

Secretary of Defense: Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense: Washington, D.C., 2000), and Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973* (Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense: Washington, D.C., 1998).

Suzanne C. Nielsen, a Colonel in the U.S. Army, is a Professor of Political Science and the head of the Department of Social Sciences at West Point. She earned a B.S. in political science at West Point in 1990 and a Ph.D. in political science at Harvard University in 2003. Her dissertation, “Preparing for War: the Dynamics of Peacetime Military Reform,” focuses on change within the Army from the late 1960s into the 1980s and won the American Political Science Association’s Lasswell Award for the best dissertation in the field of public policy in 2002 and 2003. Her most recent book project, the seventh edition of the widely-used textbook *American National Security*, is scheduled to be released by Johns Hopkins University Press this fall.

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