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Review by **Seth Offenbach**, The City College of New York and Yeshiva University

Hannah Gurman's article "The Other Plumbers Unit: The Dissent Channel of the U.S. State Department," offers a unique scholarly analysis of how United States foreign policy makers have worked to minimize dissent within the State Department. Grand narratives of U.S. foreign policy can often make it appear as though this policy is made in a small room between a small number of important players, including the President and Secretary of State. Gurman's work complicates this story by taking account of the Foreign Service officers throughout the world who make up the bulk of the State Department's personnel. These officers are the men and women who are responsible for implementing U.S. foreign policy, which can be at odds with their personal viewpoints. Gurman also explains the great effort which policy makers have gone through in order to stifle the voices of the many Foreign Service officers.

Gurman's work will introduce many scholars to the Dissent Channel, which was created in 1971 and is still operational today. The channel is a system where any Foreign Service officer can write directly to the Secretary of State to register disagreement about decisions made in Washington. All dissents are marked top secret, minimizing the risk that the dissent will be leaked to the press and embarrass the administration. In theory, the Dissent Channel would give voice to Foreign Service officers throughout the world, and would allow alternative viewpoints into an administration's discussion of U.S. foreign policy. This could benefit administrations as they negotiate the complexity of international relations.

Liberal anti-Vietnam War protesters of the 1960s helped inspire the Dissent Channel as a way to "give some institutional teeth to the official support for rank-and-file dissent." (207) Despite this inspiration by liberal reformers, Gurman describes how the Dissent Channel did more to "isolate, discipline, and contain dissent than to advance the policy

positions of dissenters.” (212) Since its creation, all presidents have used the Dissent Channel as a means of suppressing internal dissent. Though her focus is on the Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford administrations, Gurman’s conclusion examines how diplomats who opposed the Iraq War during the George W. Bush administration used the Dissent Channel to register their complaints. As with their counterparts over the previous thirty years, they were unable to influence the administration’s actions. According to Gurman, because the Dissent Channel allowed officers to register their complaints, it served as a way of mollifying those officers, keeping them from publicizing their views.

Gurman expertly situates the creation of the Dissent Channel within the broader historiography of 1960s and 1970s U.S. politics. This was a time when disputes about the Vietnam War were dividing both the nation and the foreign policy establishment, while at the same time President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger were working aggressively to minimize the influence of anyone who opposed their policies. Within the context of both the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, it is easy to understand how the creation of the Dissent Channel fits nicely into this historical context as one more method of “quelling and containing dissent.” (223)

Gurman’s work convincingly argues that the Dissent Channel enables presidents to control opponents. However, despite the implication in the title—“The Other Plumbers Unit” is of course a reference to the Watergate burglars—she fails to fully explain Nixon’s role in the creation and implementation of the Dissent Channel. She implies that Nixon’s Assistant Secretary of State William Macomber was more directly involved in the creation and implementation of the Dissent Channel as a means of quashing dissenters. Within Gurman’s work, Nixon appears as a figure who set the tone for the era by suspecting virtually everyone of plotting against him; however she does not explain his direct role in creating the Dissent Channel. Notably, Gurman does not cite any primary source material from Nixon’s presidential archives. While this may reflect the fact that the National Archives has been in the process of moving the Nixon library from Maryland to California over the last several years, sources from those archives might have helped Gurman explain Nixon’s direct role in creation of the Dissent Channel.

Despite Nixon’s ambiguous role within the article, Gurman’s work is still extraordinarily valuable to historians of U.S. foreign policy. Few historians have cited or mentioned the Dissent Channel within their secondary works. This is likely because, as Gurman notes, the memos are often archived in a manner to ensure that historians have a hard time finding them; that Gurman was able to locate several is an impressive feat. Additionally, *Foreign Services Journal*, State Department files, and Congressional committee documents further inform her unique argument. These sources allow her to move away from the president-dominated narrative of U.S. foreign policy. This will provide historians with a more complete picture of the internal policy struggle within administrations, and the various efforts undertaken by different administrations to stifle opponents.

Gurman approaches the topic of foreign policy from a unique scholarly perspective. She works to understand how the many Foreign Services officers attempted to influence U.S. policies. Their failure does not minimize the impact of the Dissent Channel for historians. Gurman explains there is still much value to understanding how the Dissent Channel promoted the appearance of an open dialogue while working to “quell internal dissent in a way that the public could actually support.” (206) This fostered an environment where major policy decisions were made in secret, with negative long-term implications for the United States.

By focusing on the role of Foreign Service officers and their opposition to official U.S. foreign policy, Gurman opens the door to an expanded look at the role which relatively anonymous individuals can play in shaping U.S. policy. While the major elites dictate overall policy, these officers are responsible for carrying out policy directives. These officers are not always dutiful bureaucrats, and their personal beliefs often shape the implementation of the official policy directive. While Gurman’s work provides an outstanding introduction to the role of the Dissent Channel in influencing U.S. foreign policy, further historical inquiry on the role of Foreign Service officers and other State Department workers would help strengthen the historiography of the topic. In this regard, I look forward to reading future works on this topic by Hannah Gurman and others.

Seth Offenbach is Adjunct Assistant Professor of History at the City College of New York and Yeshiva University. His research focuses on the many ways in which U.S. foreign policy influences domestic policy. His article “Defending Freedom in Vietnam: A Conservative Dilemma,” will be published in the forthcoming anthology *Decades of Transformation: Contesting the Future of Conservatism in the 1960s*. He has served as a List Editor for the H-Diplo listserv since 2009.

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