David Goldman and Erin Mahan have put together a revealing collection of documents for this volume, the seventh in the FRUS sub-series on the presidential administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and the second of five within that sub-series on Vietnam. The editors (who worked on the volume in turn, first Goldman then Mahan) have sourced the documents from a variety of collections and have made a selection that encompasses a nice mix of registers: from the formal memos and cables going into and out of the White House, to the informal and unguarded conversations captured in the Nixon tapes and the telephone conversation transcripts of Assistant for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger and his deputy, Alexander Haig. In their judicious annotations and editorial notes, Goldman and Mahan also provide much appreciated signposts, reminders, and context. The product of their work is a fine addition to the FRUS series, a valuable resource for researchers, and—most importantly—a transparent and reliable record for the American public.

In short, this is an excellent work of documentary editing—a job not made easier by the volume’s scope, which covers events between the bursts of activity associated with the United States and South Vietnam’s Cambodian Incursion (U.S. action was completed by the end of June 1970) and North Vietnam’s Easter Offensive (launched at the end of March 1972). There was still a major war going on—as Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird reminded his National Security Council colleagues in September 1971, “120,000 men [estimated per year] are being killed in two countries of less than one-twentieth of the population of the United States” (doc. 259)—but U.S. ground forces were increasingly a part of it. The period of American engagement in Indochina covered by this volume, therefore, is often taken to be something of a lull.
Many of the documents bear this out. They tend not to show the main players reacting quickly to the urgent flow of events, but rather wondering at opposition capabilities and intentions, pondering alternative futures, and devising plans in slower time. Their cumulative effect is to suggest that this was an important period of recalibration between the ends and means of American strategy in the Vietnam War. This volume cannot, by itself, settle the historiographical debates over the war aims and strategies of the Nixon administration. But it does imply that the key elements of the approach that characterized America’s final, climactic year of the conflict—bombing Hanoi back to the negotiating table while at the same time sacrificing South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu on it—were in place by the time this volume draws to a close in January 1972.

The backdrop to this narrowing of means and shortening of ends is the steady pace of American troop withdrawals that is maintained throughout this volume. The threat of Congress cutting funds for the war effort, or imposing deadlines, hangs over the administration in these documents (e.g., docs 70, 191, 194, 197, 200, 257, 294), requiring President Nixon to, in his own words, keep “one jump ahead of the sheriff, the whole time” (doc. 259). Annexing another phase of troop withdrawals was his favoured method for doing this, adjusting the numbers and dates as circumstances dictated. He announced a larger than anticipated reduction in troop numbers in April 1971, for example, because of the domestic political pressures generated by the disappointment of Lam Son 719, the major South Vietnamese (but American-inspired) offensive operation into Laos that took place during February and March (doc. 170).

Congress is the main antagonist in this chronicle of diminishing flexibility. But others emerge from these documents, such as Laird, notwithstanding the apt editorial comment that the Department of Defense (along with other departments and agencies) “played a much reduced role under President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, who

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concentrated policy in their own hands” (xv). Laird was both a loyal servant and generally supportive of the administration's military moves. (“He's a rascal,” Nixon told Kissinger during the early stages of Lam Son 719, “but by golly, he’s our rascal” [doc. 131].) He could at times, however, act as something of a spoiler. It was in the area of policy implementation, rather than of advice, where his influence was felt—through what Haig described as Laird’s indirect “management chicanery” regarding budgets and draft calls (doc. 16; also docs 29, 48, 55). Laird ensured there was no going back on the withdrawal timeline.

Elements of the U.S. military also kept up the pressure regarding the drawdown. Responding to Kissinger’s concern at leaks regarding troop withdrawal plans, Laird noted that “there might be some Army officers—some are getting to the point where they think Vietnam has hurt the Army” (doc. 255; also doc. 16). And Kissinger expressed concern to Thieu that drug use by U.S. troops stationed in Vietnam was such a problem as to potentially force the pace of withdrawals to quicken (doc. 231; also docs 92, 219, 220).

The mostly unrealized desire by Nixon and, especially, Kissinger to retain some flexibility on troop withdrawals (e.g., docs 29, 157) was largely driven by the pair’s wish to arrive at a satisfactory deal with Hanoi at the secret peace negotiations held in Paris. The issues at stake in those negotiations were winnowed down to two: the place of Thieu in any settlement; and the pace and completion date of the American military exit from Vietnam (doc. 245; also docs 34, 75, 223, 233, 236, 237). By late 1971, U.S. bargaining power on the latter issue had been significantly reduced as the troop withdrawals completed and announced left the United States with little in the way of a ground combat capability in Vietnam. In a mid-September strategy memo to Nixon, Kissinger acknowledged that this negotiating asset had “all but withered away” (doc. 257).

The effects of the drawdown were also felt in the military realm. Even though U.S. combat troops did not participate directly in Lam Som 719, their presence in Vietnam was still essential to the operation. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer noted in January 1971, Lam Son 719 would be “the last time that the South Vietnamese will be able to mount this kind of an operation. Our forces will have been drawn down to the point that we will be unable to take over the security mission in South Vietnam to release South Vietnamese forces for this kind of operation outside” (doc. 110; also doc. 153). Of the very useful documentary explication of the origins, course, and aftermath of Operation Lam Son 719 provided by Goldman and Mahan, perhaps the most revealing line is that of Kissinger to the Army Chief of Staff, General William Westmoreland, made some weeks after the precipitous withdrawal of South Vietnamese forces from Laos. The “problem,” mused Kissinger, was that “you cannot say you learned from this experience because there will be no other one” (doc. 178). So while this volume is peppered with largely positive assessments of “Vietnamization,” the strategy of building South Vietnam’s military capability to continue the fight after America’s departure (e.g., docs 60, 220, 258, 259, 275), those assessments are nonetheless made in the shadow of a realization that Saigon’s military posture would
become increasingly defensive and precarious over successive dry (i.e., military campaigning) seasons.

South Vietnam’s military vulnerability could be offset to an extent by U.S. air power. Without a land combat capability, bombing was also the only American military means left by the end of this period that could potentially force the pace of negotiations. Except for annual budgeting exercises to set the number of sorties to be flown per month (docs 13, 20, 240), the air effort within South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is mostly absent from this volume. Presumably it is by now too routine (or sensitive, in the case of Cambodia) to be a frequent topic of discussion within high levels of the administration. Because North Vietnam had been more-or-less off limits to U.S. bombers since late in the Lyndon Johnson administration, however, the temptation to strike the North is palpable in this volume.

Occasionally that temptation is realized: in the strikes launched in conjunction with the attempt to rescue U.S. prisoners of war during the Son Tay prison raid of November 1970 (docs 66, 74, 79); in strikes designed to take the pressure off American air operations in Laos during Lam Son 719 (doc. 132); and in strikes launched in September (doc. 256) and December (docs 278, 288) of 1971. All of these were couched as instances of “protective reaction” and/or retaliation for North Vietnamese violations of a 1968 understanding regarding the bombing halt. But the latter two were also clearly signalling Hanoi. Small in scale, they nonetheless represented something of a departure. And they were accompanied with private talk of much bigger air actions against North Vietnam. Unable to sleep one night in November 1971, Nixon pondered what to do “if those prisoners are not back by the time of the [1972 U.S. presidential] election.” He suggested to Kissinger that “the day after that election—win, lose, or draw—we will bomb the bejeezus out of them. Because then, to hell with history.... Put that into a bargaining equation” (doc. 278; also doc. 230).

In September 1971, Kissinger wrote that “a negotiated settlement has always been far preferable. Rather than run the risk of South Vietnam crumbling around our remaining forces, a peace settlement would end the war with an act of policy and leave the future of South Vietnam to the historical process. There would be a clear terminal date rather than a gradual winding down. We could heal the wounds in this country as our men left peace behind on the battlefield and a healthy interval for South Vietnam’s fate to unfold” (doc. 257). With the promise of a U.S. exit worth increasingly little, Kissinger proposed cautiously using “just about the only negotiating lever we have left,” the political position of Thieu. The preservation of Thieu had long been a fundamental feature of American support for Saigon—Nixon thought his removal “would be tantamount to the dismantling of the organized non-communist forces” (doc. 47; also doc. 227)—and Kissinger had held the line on this point in Paris (docs 34, 35, 45, 206, 207, 223, 227, 231, 233, 236, 237, 245). Kissinger’s idea of late 1971, for Thieu to resign ahead of a new election, was not a dramatic use of this negotiating lever and it was given the nod—or perhaps wink—by Thieu (doc. 268). But it was the first suggestion that Thieu relinquish power, albeit only temporarily, and a hint of things to come.
The course of events from mid-1970 to the end of 1971, then, set in place trajectories which culminated in 1972—the desperate search for a negotiated settlement and the bombing of North Vietnam to secure one. But this denouement was not inevitable. There are hints in these documents that the South Vietnamese lower house and presidential elections of August and October 1971 (docs 100, 119, 177, 218, 220, 225, 231, 243, 248, 249, 250, 251, 253, 254 n. 6, 258, 259, 261) could have been something of a circuit-breaker. Kissinger certainly thought the uncontested presidential election (one of Thieu's opponents was disqualified from standing; the other pulled out citing corruption) made Thieu more vulnerable in both South Vietnam and the United States, thereby changing the negotiating dynamic in Paris (doc. 257).

Perhaps different processes, outcomes, and reactions to the elections would have made no difference at all. But if nothing else, the elections as seen through these documents depict the American strategic quandary in miniature. A healthy non-communist, anti-Thieu opposition was considered an important part of building Saigon’s political viability, but when that opposition was enlarged, first in the National Assembly through the lower house election and second in the South Vietnamese population more generally as a result of the farcical presidential election, it was seen as hurting that very viability and weakening the U.S. diplomatic position in the process. And so 1971 rolled into 1972 and the war roared to life once again.

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