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Authors' Response by **Jeffrey P. Kimball**, Miami University, Emeritus, and **William Burr**, National Security Archive

When *Nixon's Nuclear Specter: The Secret Nuclear Alert, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War* was published in 2015, we naturally hoped it would receive positive assessments in the scholarly journals, although we could take nothing for granted. We have been gratified by the favorable reviews that appeared in a variety of publications.¹ We thank Luke Nichter for joining the discussion with his July 3, 2018 commentary on H-Diplo about the 2017 symposium between us and Robert Jervis and Mark Atwood Lawrence in *The Journal of Cold War Studies* about our 2015 book—as well as for his November 2015 review of the book on H-Diplo.² In our view, however, neither the book review nor the article review adequately or accurately describes the subject matter of our book—an element that we think should be part of all book and article reviews.

In his current commentary, Nichter gives scant attention to the matter at hand—namely, the symposium discussion in *The Journal of Cold War Studies* about *Nixon's Nuclear Specter*. Rather than explore our larger arguments about Nixon's Vietnam strategy in 1969, he focuses on only one issue: why President Richard Nixon in early October 1969 aborted his threatened early November bombing and mining assault on North

¹ For example, Michael Krepon, *Arms Control Today* (December 2015), https://www.armscontrol.org/ACT/2015_12/Book-Reviews/Nuclear-Weapons-and-Nixons-Madman-Theory; Robert G. Kaiser, "The Disaster of Richard Nixon," *The New York Review of Books*, 21 April 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/04/21/disaster-of-richard-nixon/>; Jonathan M. House, *Michigan War Studies Review*, 27 April 2016, <http://www.miwsr.com/2016-043.aspx>; John Dumbrell, *Journal of American History* (September 2016); Sean L. Malloy, *Journal of Military History* (Summer 2016); Leopoldo Nuti, *Cold War History* 17:4 (2017). Our book also won an award from the Military History Group.

² <http://tiny.cc/AR780>; The H-Diplo review was published as part of H-Diplo's H-Net Reviews weekend publications series. <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/98962/nichter-burr-and-kimball-nixons-nuclear-specter-secret-alert-1969>.

Vietnam. The purpose of the operation, codenamed DUCK HOOK, would have been that of intimidating or forcing North Vietnam into making diplomatic concessions in the Paris negotiations in order to end the U.S. war in Vietnam on terms favorable to the Nixon administration. Although Nixon cancelled the threatened operation, in October 1969 he launched a substitute or stopgap exercise: a worldwide nuclear alert, which was kept secret from the public. Its purpose was to lend credibility to prior threats—a last-ditch effort to frighten Hanoi and also persuade Moscow to put more pressure on the North Vietnamese to make the diplomatic concessions Washington wanted before Nixon’s November 1 deadline.

Nichter contends that “the most important explanation behind the ‘non-event’ was domestic policy, not foreign policy”—namely, Nixon’s concern about congressional reactions. (The term ‘non-event’ was originally Mark Atwood Lawrence’s oddly dismissive label in his *Journal of Cold War Studies* commentary for the secret nuclear alert).³ Nichter further argues that “Nixon ... thought about foreign policy in terms of the domestic policy consequences, something that has not been considered nearly as much in our discussion of the 1969 nuclear alert, as we have focused on specific foreign policy actions. Part of the reason I suspect we are still talking about this is that it continues to vex us and will continue to do so for as long as we consider it a foreign policy action alone.”

We may have underplayed the congressional angle, but based on new and old evidence, we did give considerable attention to Nixon’s domestic concerns. Nixon’s worries about possible congressional responses to DUCK HOOK was—as we explain in the book—only one determinant in his cancellation of the planned November DUCK HOOK operation and the launching of the secret worldwide nuclear alert in mid-October 1969. In early October, Nixon—who understood without anyone else’s help that the war was now “Nixon’s War”—was deeply concerned that if he launched DUCK HOOK in between two massive antiwar demonstrations in October and November 1969, then matters could spin out of control on the domestic front, perhaps triggering larger and even violent demonstrations. Based on prior opinion polls, he also worried about the possible reactions of the larger citizenry to a dramatic escalation of the war.

Nixon was also concerned about reactions from opponents within his own administration to such a dramatic escalation of the war: Secretary of State William Rogers, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. The Joint Chiefs of Staff, moreover, did not believe that the shock tactics prescribed by the administration’s Madman Theory-inspired DUCK HOOK plan would be militarily effective. They favored their more conventional ‘military’ plan codenamed PRUNING KNIFE. Not least, Nixon himself may have thought that Soviet reactions would be problematic and—based on information National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger and intelligence agencies had gathered—he surmised that the Politburo in Hanoi would not yield easily, even in the face of an air and sea military onslaught.

Just as important, Nixon was not sure he would be able to hold public and congressional support for the six months or more it would take to win Hanoi’s concessions at the bargaining table. The whole of his Vietnam policy was partly driven by his recognition that it was essential to bring the Vietnam War to an end in order to calm domestic U.S. politics and possibly win reelection in 1972. Had Nixon initiated bombing and mining operations in North Vietnam, he would have caused a firestorm of protest, which would have been inconsistent with his domestically driven Vietnam strategy. While it is true that we did not explore the

³ “Forum: ‘Nuclear Weapons, Coercive Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War: Perspectives on Nixon’s Nuclear Specter’,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19:4 (Fall 2017): 192.

pressures that were developing in Congress by the end of 1969 (pressures that would more fully evolve over time), during the first eleven months of the year, Nixon took secret actions that he hoped would accelerate the timetable for a favorable Vietnam settlement. At first, he thought that threat making and then DUCK HOOK would bring a settlement closer. Yet, domestic political pressures constrained his freedom of action—thus the secrecy about his threats to Hanoi and the launching of the “non-event” secret nuclear alert.

The secret alert was not only a threat-making substitute for the cancellation of DUCK HOOK. It was also an operation that Nixon vainly hoped might induce Moscow to press Hanoi to make diplomatic concessions. Thus, we should not let ourselves be too vexed about the reasons Nixon aborted DUCK HOOK and ordered the secret worldwide nuclear alert.

Also, Nixon’s commitment to the doctrine of credibility reduced his freedom of action to satisfy domestic and congressional pressures to exit Vietnam more quickly. As long as he (and Kissinger) assumed that U.S. global credibility was at stake in Vietnam (as well as his credibility with the political Right at home), he could not ‘bug out’ without a satisfactory negotiated settlement that preserved South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu for a decent interval of time. With the cancellation of DUCK HOOK and the failure of the secret nuclear alert to intimidate Hanoi and Moscow, Nixon and Kissinger shifted to a long-route Vietnam strategy of de-Americanization, Vietnamization, and triangular diplomacy—accompanied by political attacks on the Democrats in Congress and the antiwar movement. While Nichter argues that we portray Nixon as “rigidly [adhering] to a single strategy,” we in fact show that his and Kissinger’s strategy was complex and that it evolved over time.

Whether the book is “denser than necessary” we will leave to readers. We disagree, however, with Nichter’s assessment that the book was a “redux of material that had appeared in earlier work by the authors.” To present the context for DUCK HOOK and the secret nuclear alert, it was necessary to include some information from our initial article in *Cold War History* and Jeffrey Kimball’s books on Nixon and Vietnam. Yet, as our understanding of the events improved, we re-presented this information *de novo*. More significantly, to provide context for the events of 1969 we started the book with a background on the history of nuclear alerting during the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the impact of the nuclear taboo. Finally, the new information that had become available on the “decent interval,” the madman theory, Duck Hook, and the nuclear alert added so much to historical knowledge of developments during 1969 that we believed that a new book was warranted.

On another matter, Nichter makes an interesting point about the Nixon diary. From what we understand, the diary material remains either with the Nixon estate or the Nixon Foundation. No doubt it would be valuable for historians if this material entered the public record (the same would be true of Kissinger’s diaries). That the tapes include some of the diary material is an interesting find. But Nichter does not make it clear to the reader why he believes that the January 1973 diary entry is so illuminating about Nixon’s “thought process.”

Nichter’s suggestion that had former president Lyndon Johnson lived another year or two, a different “scenario” could have developed for Nixon’s Watergate problem is problematic. It is true that Johnson saved Nixon’s bacon by not blowing the whistle on him about the secret contacts with Anna Chennault and the Thieu-Ky government during the 1968 campaign. But to suggest that Johnson, who died in late January, would have gone public in 1973 to urge his party and the American public in general to be more understanding about Nixon’s transgressions is hard to believe. First, Johnson thought that Nixon’s conduct in 1968 was virtually treasonous, but going public would have meant exposing sources and methods and also

illegal domestic spying. Second, had a live Johnson offered support to Nixon in 1973, he would have had little traction with the Congressional Democrats who had rejected his Vietnam strategy in 1968.

Third, as much as Johnson was an exponent of presidential power—and had he been alive in 1973—he would not likely have offered support to a president whose abuses of power were tarnishing the institution of the presidency and whom he believed had committed treason.