

Key Sources for Nixon's Foreign Policy
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*[The views expressed in this guide are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of the Department of State.]

Presidential libraries are gold mines of documentation for foreign policy decisions and the conduct of foreign affairs, but the most extraordinary collection of presidential documents on foreign policy is the Nixon Presidential Materials Project, now at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland (Archives II), but soon to be moved to the Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California. Nixon was a complex man, and his foreign policy records are as fascinating as he was, but what makes the Nixon documentary record different from other presidential libraries' collections is that it contains unique records that provide an entirely different level of information beyond the usual paper documentation. The materials have the standard minutes of the National Security Council (NSC) and NSC subgroup meetings, memoranda to the president, memoranda of conversations of the president with world leaders, records of the NSC staffers, telegrams, intelligence memoranda, and so on, which are the staple of all presidential libraries. However, they also have something else.

Obviously, the most famous collection of records in the Nixon materials are the White House tape recordings, a virtual "you are there" tool for understanding and assessing Nixon's first love, foreign policy. Nixon was not the first president to have an extensive taping system for posterity. John F. Kennedy taped 325 of his meetings, for a

total of 248 hours of audio, and 275 of his telephone conversations, for a total of about 16 hours. Lyndon B. Johnson taped 9,300 of his telephone conversations, for a total of more than 400 hours, and after January 1968 he taped Cabinet meetings, for a total of more than 200 hours.¹ The difference was that Kennedy and Johnson had to switch the taping system on themselves and could pick their moments; Nixon's system was voice-activated and tied to the president's location. When Nixon entered either of his two offices it started, and when he left it shut off. As long as there was tape in the machines, the system captured everything, although the tape occasionally did run out.² Furthermore, Nixon taped more than 13 times the hours Kennedy taped and more 6 times the hours Johnson taped.

Over 2,000 of the 3,700 hours of Nixon tapes have now been released, and scholars patient enough to listen to key segments will find amazing insights into how Nixon and his principal foreign policy advisers—especially Special Assistant for National Security Henry Kissinger—developed strategies (linkage, triangular diplomacy, and *realpolitik*) to deal with the complex world of superpowers and emerging superpowers.³ The Nixon tapes are not so much a guide to the formulation of foreign policy under Nixon—that is best discerned through official NSC documents—but a window into Nixon's psyche and attitudes, his beliefs, hopes, prejudices, and fears. They provide a unique source for understanding what made the president tick—a source that historians have rarely enjoyed before. By listening to tapes a historian can be in the Oval Office or the Executive Office Building with the president and eavesdrop on his conversations with

his major foreign policy advisers or foreign leaders. To historians this is documentary heaven—but it comes at a price.

The Nixon tapes are often raw, incoherent, rambling, and repetitive, and are of poor audio quality (which sometimes can be enhanced by audio software).⁴ They must be used with caution, because Nixon had a tendency to exaggerate, vent, and posture. For example, he would announce that he wanted officials fired on the spot and rant about his intentions or his toughness as a leader. What Nixon says on one day in the heat of the moment is not in itself absolute proof of his intentions, just evidence of his state of mind at that particular time. Obviously, upon reflection a president can change his mind or moderate his attitudes. Multiple examples from the tapes, backed up by other documents, are the best way to discern Nixon's real motivations and reasoning. Still, the tapes provide absolutely fascinating insight into the Nixon administration's shadowy and secretive policy machinations.

Another collection of the “you are there” documents are the transcripts of Henry Kissinger's telephone conversations from his tenure as the special assistant to the president for national security affairs and as secretary of state for both presidents Nixon and Ford. While the originals (housed at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Kissinger Papers) are not yet available to the public, copies covering the Nixon administration—until August 8, 1974—are declassified and open at Archives II. The Kissinger telephone transcripts for the Ford administration are in the Department of State's electronic reading room for the period when he was secretary of state (<http://foia.state.gov>). Kissinger's telephone conversations were either listened to by a secretary

and transcribed on the spot, or taped and then transcribed. Apparently the tapes were either reused or did not survive, since only the transcripts remain. The telephone conversations are often cryptic, but they reveal much of what Kissinger was working on and what he was attempting to accomplish. Reading eight years' worth of transcripts provides valuable insight into his way of conducting business and his personality. They show his well-known charm, his sense of humor, and sometimes his temper. By themselves the transcripts are a remarkable source; added to the Nixon tapes, they provide an extraordinary array of documentary evidence.

The third source that makes the Nixon Presidential Materials so multilayered is the Haldeman diaries. The diaries were originally handwritten, but after December 1970, Haldeman dictated his entries onto tapes. He published a selection of extracts in a book, H.R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (New York, 1994), and produced a much more extensive multimedia edition on CD. The multimedia edition has full diary entries and many more entries than the book, as well as additional information added by Haldeman. However, technology has moved so quickly that the CD-ROM, now out of print, runs only on older operating systems (i.e., Windows 98).

In whatever form they are used (book, CD, or original entries and tapes), the Haldeman diaries are an invaluable source. What makes Haldeman's observations so useful is that he did not have much experience in foreign policy, and because of his naiveté his views were basically unfiltered. In contrast to more seasoned U.S. officials, who would never admit that politics affected their actions, he was not reticent about acknowledging political motivations for foreign policy decisions both large and small.

Haldeman was also extremely frank in his views of Nixon's foreign policy advisers, but his loyalty to the president made him uncritical of Nixon.

A fourth source, the Moorer Diary, is not part of the Nixon Presidential Materials, but rather part of Record Group 218, official files of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer. Now at the National Archives, it is not yet available to the public. When it is released it will provide an extra insight into Nixon's relations with the military and the Department of Defense. Moorer's is not a diary in the classic sense, but rather a working account of his day, with documents he saw and records of telephone conversation he had on that day attached. To circumvent Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, who did not always see eye to eye with the president, Nixon increasingly used Moorer as his go-to man in the Pentagon. Their relationship became complicated when it was discovered that Moorer was involved in a Joint Chiefs of Staff spying operation on Nixon and Kissinger by Yeoman Charles Radford, who worked on detail to the NSC staff. Although the operation became public knowledge, Nixon, who had come to rely on Moorer, chose not to fire him or other high-ranking military men involved. The Moorer Diary presents an inside look at the very complex relationship among Moorer, Nixon and Kissinger, which essentially took place outside of normal channels and was overlaid with a certain amount of intrigue.⁵

In the more traditional paper files of the Nixon Presidential Materials the foremost source is the National Security Files. These files, maintained by the NSC staff, are the mother lode of paper documentation on foreign policy. While similar files exist in virtually all other presidential libraries, the Nixon National Security Files collection is

remarkable because of its size (1350 boxes) and because Assistant for National Security Henry Kissinger maintained complete control over the flow of paper from the bureaucracy. All recommendations for action or information had to be first read, summarized and analyzed by one of Kissinger's NSC staffers. If a recommendation was deemed worthy of presidential consideration, it was then sent to the president under a substantial memorandum from Kissinger. Nothing went directly to the president from any department or agency relating to foreign policy without first being vetted by the NSC staff and, ultimately, Kissinger. That policy has since led former Department of State officers to claim that the NSC staff plagiarized their memoranda, but in theory the NSC was supposed to provide an analysis of the motivations of the sender and prevent State and other agencies from boxing the president into decisions that they wanted. The result is multilayered National Security Files, which provide the historian with not only the raw material of policy decisions, but also a look at how the NSC staff and Kissinger controlled information and dominated the bureaucracy.

In addition, there are in the NSC Files a separate, extensive set of Kissinger Office Files (149 boxes) and two Alexander Haig Files, the Chronological File and the Special Files (totaling 67 boxes). The Haig Files are the most extensive collection of materials relating to a deputy to the assistant to the president for national security affairs in any presidential library. Haig's responsibility and influence grew in the Nixon administration, and his files reflect his importance. Other NSC aides' files are also valuable, especially the extensive Harold Saunders Files for the Middle East.

Another difference between the Nixon collection and earlier presidents' records is the president's and the NSC Staff's use of backchannel messages—telegrams that went directly to or from the president, Kissinger or other White House staffers to an ambassador in the field without Secretary of State Rogers or anyone in the Department of State or Defense knowing about it. Other presidents used backchannel messages, but not as frequently and consistently as Nixon did. The backchannel section of the NSC Files, arranged by regional area and topics, is an important source. An even more significant backchannel collection is the confidential channel between Assistant to the President Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin. The channel was established in early 1969 and continued throughout the Nixon presidency and into the Ford administration. It allowed Kissinger and Dobrynin to meet secretly either in the White House or at the Soviet embassy with virtually no one in the U.S. government beyond Kissinger and Nixon knowing. There is a fair amount of skulking around by Kissinger and Dobrynin to keep this supersensitive dialogue and negotiating tool secret from the rest of the U.S. bureaucracy (although the channel was more widely known in Moscow, causing Kissinger considerable heartburn). The memoranda of conversations, memoranda to the president, and memoranda for the record that make up the accounts of this channel prepared by Kissinger himself, along with the notes that Dobrynin and Kissinger exchanged, are in the President's Trip Files of the NSC Files. In addition, in the Kissinger telephone conversations there is a specific sub-collection of conversations with Dobrynin, most of which relate to the confidential channel.⁶

Probably because he was a historian himself and aware of the importance of the historical record—and possibly because, as he himself confessed, he had a healthy ego—Kissinger insisted that the meetings he attended, be they with foreign leaders or meetings of the NSC sub-groups that he chaired, such as the Senior Review Committee, Washington Special Actions Group, the Verification Panel, or the Defense Policy Committee, all have virtually verbatim records. Pity the poor note-takers on Kissinger's staff. There are extensive meeting notes or memoranda of conversations, often 50 or 60 pages long, but usually at least 10 to 20 pages. The accounts of Kissinger's meetings are the most extensive of any assistant to the president for national security affairs.

When Henry Kissinger became secretary of state in September 1973, he held weekly staff meetings with the principal officers at State (mostly assistant secretaries or their equivalent, many of whom Kissinger brought from the NSC to State). Like most Kissinger records of meetings, these staff meetings accounts are virtual verbatim transcripts and provide a frank and revealing picture of how Kissinger interacted with his senior staff at State. He made little attempt to soften criticism, gloss over differences of opinion or personality, or hide his displeasure with his staff. These records have the ring of verisimilitude. They are not part of the Nixon Presidential Materials, but rather are a former Department of State lot file, now available at Archives II as Transcripts of Henry Kissinger Staff Meetings, Record Group 59, series designate A1(5177). These staff meetings extend throughout the Ford administration.⁷

This survey of the Nixon Presidential Materials and related documentation is based on a decade of research done by the twenty-three historians responsible for

research, selection, and annotation of the *Foreign Relations* series at the Department of State. Since Harry Truman's presidency, the *Foreign Relations* series has mined the presidential libraries. With each administration, from Truman to Nixon, more and better records emerged from those libraries. Increasingly, *Foreign Relations* volumes rely on the records in the presidential library to the point where in many Nixon volumes the presidential documents printed or cited outnumber the Department of State records printed or cited. Currently the Department of State has released 17 *Foreign Relations* volumes (11 print and 6 electronic-only or e-volumes, the latter available only on the department website) of a projected 57 volumes (41 print and 16 e-volumes) for the Nixon and the Nixon-Ford administrations.⁸ This massive coverage of the Nixon-Ford era will present a full and comprehensive account of Nixon's and Ford's major foreign policy decisions and initiatives, but it will only present a small (albeit important) part of the total Nixon-Ford record.

The Nixon presidential holdings, notwithstanding their massive size, are not perfect. Occasionally meetings went unrecorded, but on the whole the documentation available on Richard Nixon's foreign policy is the most extensive and multilayered of any presidency. If there is no written record of a meeting, there may be a tape recording of it, if it was a meeting with the president that took place in the Oval Office, the Executive Office hideaway, or the Cabinet Room. Alternatively, it might be described in a telephone conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, or mentioned in passing in the Haldeman diaries. The sheer size of the holdings and the complex nature of the Nixon foreign policy records present a challenge to those who must process and declassify these

holdings, but the declassifiers and the staff of the Nixon Presidential Materials at Archives II have made commendable, even heroic, efforts in opening the records to the public. Their excellent job will no doubt be carried on by the staff of the Nixon Library at Yorba Linda. Scholars can look forward to spending many useful days exploring, analyzing, and assessing this extraordinary record of a pivotal presidency during a crucial period of the Cold War.

¹ John Prados, *The White House Tapes: Eavesdropping on the President* (New York and London, 2003) pp. 7-12.

² Telephone call with John Powers, Nixon Presidential Materials, Archives II, College Park, MD, Feb. 28, 2007.

³ Obviously not all tapes concern foreign policy, but my estimate would be that about half concern or touch on foreign policy. Virtually all *Foreign Relations* volumes that document the Nixon administration after February 1971, when the taping system was installed, contain transcripts of Nixon tapes. The volume that has the most extensive collection so far is *Foreign Relations, 1969-1976*, Vol. XIV, Soviet Union, October 1971-May 1972. This volume documents the sometimes rocky road to the Moscow Summit, culminating in Nixon's trip to the Moscow, the first visit of a U.S. president to the Soviet Union.

⁴ The Office of the Historian used Cool Edit and then Soft Soap software to improve the audio quality of the tapes.

⁵ For information on the Radford case, which includes key extracts from Nixon tapes, see *Foreign Relations, 1969-1976*, Vol. II, Organization and Management of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972, Documents, 164-166.

⁶ The Department of State, Office of the Historian, will be releasing in October 2007 a joint documentary publication with the Russian Government entitled, *U.S.–Soviet Relations in an Era of Détente, 1969-1972*. This volume will highlight the Kissinger-Dobrynin confidential channel by publishing side-by-side U.S. and Soviet original accounts of their meetings and related documents, as well as side-by-side accounts of meetings between other U.S. and Soviet leaders. The volume will culminate with key U.S. and Soviet documents on the Moscow Summit.

⁷ These staff meeting accounts are a staple of Nixon-Ford *Foreign Relations* volumes for 1973-1976. The first of these volumes to be published is *Foreign Relations, 1969-1976*, Volume E-6, Documents on Africa, 1973-1976, especially the chapter on Ethiopia. The volume is available only online at www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e6.

⁸ The 11 print volumes released so far are available for purchase at the Government Printing Office; order online at www.bookstore.gpo.gov. All 17 volumes (including the 6 e-volumes) are available for viewing or downloading free of charge on the Department of State website at www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/nixon. The remaining 30 print and 10 e-volumes volumes for the Nixon-Ford administration will be released on the website. The print volumes will also be for sale at the Government Printing Office.