Preface

The job of secretary of defense can be nearly impossible. Modern secretaries of defense preside over the nation's largest bureaucracy; propose, defend, and manage budgets that exceed those of many mid-size countries; interact with cabinet colleagues on policy matters that are often contentious; and answer to presidents with their own distinctive personalities and leadership styles. Secretaries are responsible for a massive military establishment with personnel strewn throughout the globe. At any moment, a crisis might erupt that could derail their agendas and force them into a reactive posture for days, weeks, months, or even the duration of a Pentagon tenure. Secretaries must present the president with recommendations and options developed by senior military officers and civilian officials, based on incomplete and often inaccurate intelligence. They must regularly report to and testify before some portion of the 435 voting members of the United States House of Representatives and 100 members of the United States Senate in order to fund the defense establishment. They must deal with profit-driven defense contractors and the media whose job is to report on the Pentagon, including its successes, failures, and scandals.[1]

This volume covers four years, January 1973 to January 1977, that were not the best of times. If the stability of the executive branch is the measure of comparison, they were some of the most contentious in the nation's history. The normal challenges faced by a secretary were exacerbated by turmoil in the executive branch. Rather than work for a recently elected (or re-elected) president with a mandate, the first two secretaries of defense from the period, Elliot Richardson and James Schlesinger, served a president who began his second term under investigation for crimes committed by his presidential campaign and a subsequent coverup orchestrated from the White House. The third secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, worked for the only president not elected to the presidency or the vice presidency. Gerald Ford became the nation’s 38th president following Richard Nixon’s August 1974 resignation and found himself in the Oval Office as the choice of his disgraced predecessor.

Beyond domestic political upheaval, the three secretaries also had to deal with the fallout from the first failure of a major war in American history. The withdrawal of American combat forces in 1973 resulted in the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) in April 1975, a government the United States had expended blood and treasure to prop up and defend against the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam). The war convulsed American society and created deep divisions in American politics and culture. Many of the same members of Congress who had supported U.S. escalation in Vietnam a decade earlier now reflected their constituents’ skepticism toward the military and called for draconian cuts to the Defense Department budget. Richardson, Schlesinger, and Rumsfeld fought against and ultimately prevailed over those who sought deep reductions into the Pentagon’s budget. They argued persuasively before Congress that the United States could not afford to let its military deteriorate.

The last American combat troops left South Vietnam on March 29, 1973. Two months earlier, Defense Secretary Elliot Richardson had endorsed his predecessor’s policy of ending conscription and relying entirely on volunteers for military service. President Nixon had hoped the end of the draft and the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Vietnam would help heal the bitter domestic divisions the war had spawned and rebuild a bipartisan foreign policy consensus that existed before the war. A self-made crisis consumed Nixon’s presidency before he could realize these ambitions. His re-election committee hired burglars to break into the Democratic

National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex, and when the five men were arrested, the president and his aides made the situation worse by attempting to cover up the crime. From January 1973 through mid-1974, investigations by Congress and the media commanded public attention, preoccupied Nixon, and led him to make dramatic changes to the administration's national security team.

Nixon's first major move was to shift Elliot Richardson, a paragon of the Eastern Establishment, from the helm of the Defense Department to the Justice Department. Richardson succeeded Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, who had resigned under Nixon's direction on April 30. As Nixon attempted to distance himself from Watergate in an address to the nation on the evening of the resignations, the president explained that he was moving Richardson to Justice to get to the bottom of Watergate, even if it meant appointing a special prosecutor, as he knew Richardson to be "a man of unimpeachable integrity and rigorously high principle."[2] Nixon then moved Director of Central Intelligence James Schlesinger to succeed Richardson at the Pentagon. Nixon's initial efforts to squelch the investigation failed as did his attempts to direct investigators away from the presidency. Just before leaving the Pentagon, Richardson took Nixon at his word and signaled his intent to appoint Archibald Cox as special prosecutor for the Watergate matter. By July, a concurrent Senate investigation uncovered the existence of a secret White House taping system, which Senate investigators and Cox (in office since Richardson's confirmation as attorney general) immediately subpoenaed. When Nixon refused to comply, the Watergate scandal ballooned into a constitutional crisis.

Desperate to save his presidency, Nixon focused his waning energy and attention on his mounting political troubles to the exclusion of much else. By 1973, Kissinger had achieved celebrity status, thanks to his role in negotiating the end of American combat involvement in

Vietnam, opening relations with China, negotiating with Moscow the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement (SALT I). Perhaps most importantly, Kissinger was far more skillful dealing with the press and shaping his public image than were the president and the defense secretary. With Nixon ever more distracted by Watergate, Kissinger began wielding even greater control over national security policy than he had during the first term, often speaking and acting with the authority ordinarily reserved only to presidents. Besieged by Watergate, Nixon reluctantly enhanced the power of his administration's brightest star, Kissinger, the coauthor of so many of his diplomatic triumphs in his first term, by nominating him in September 1973 to head the State Department while retaining his post as national security adviser. In Kissinger, the three defense secretaries had to deal with a man of extraordinary power, intellect, bureaucratic cunning, and ample ability for self-promotion. Kissinger's outsized influence on a wide range of national security issues spanning the term shared by Nixon and Ford, both as national security adviser and then secretary of state, presented the three secretaries with a formidable opponent more concerned with détente with the Soviet Union, nuclear arms limitations, and diplomatic settlements than with U.S. military capacity and posture.

The major theme throughout the volume is the secretaries' shared belief in the importance of reinvigorating the armed services in the wake of Vietnam to better confront the Soviet military buildup despite the Watergate headwinds, congressionally imposed budget cuts, and inflation. Interwoven in accounts of their efforts a second major theme emerges: Schlesinger's and Rumsfeld's efforts to challenge Henry Kissinger's hold over national security policy and his promotion of détente with Moscow. Both secretaries were highly skeptical of the effectiveness of Nixon's and Kissinger's détente-era summits and of treaties aimed at modulating Soviet behavior. Despite the improved relationship between the two superpowers, the defense secretaries observed the Soviets' unabated improvement in conventional and strategic capabilities in the mid-1970s and feared that, after Leonid Brezhnev, a more aggressive Soviet leadership might threaten American national security with military capabilities developed during détente.

This book is not a comprehensive history of U.S. national security or an international history of the Cold War in the mid-1970s. Nor is it a study of the political and economic tumult of the era. It is an examination of how international, political, and economic matters—especially inflation—affected the defense secretaries' agendas. It details how the Pentagon's top leaders faced the of the major crises of the era, including the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the Cyprus invasion by Turkey and its consequences, the collapse of South Vietnam, the Mayaguez incident, and the Angolan Civil War. Many of these subjects have already received excellent scholarly treatment elsewhere. This volume adds a missing dimension to existing work by zeroing in on how the three secretaries of defense and their staffs handled these multi-layered, often interrelated challenges.

Each Pentagon chief brought unique perspectives and talents to addressing the challenges he confronted. Although his background and later actions as attorney general suggest Richardson would have made a formidable secretary of defense, his tenure was too short for him to deliver on his ambitious agenda. Schlesinger focused his considerable intellectual energy on preventing cuts he thought would be perilous to the American military. He saw the Soviet conventional and strategic buildup of the mid-1970s as more dangerous than Kissinger did, but also more vulnerable to an American riposte guided by the proper strategic analysis. Schlesinger, however, lacked the political shrewdness necessary to work effectively with Congress or with Nixon's successor, Ford, and his advisers, who tired of the inherited defense secretary's ego. Ford fired him in November 1975. His successor, Rumsfeld, combined superior political acumen with a talent for bureaucratic infighting to effectively challenge Kissinger's control over national security policy in the months leading up to Ford's electoral defeat.

Writing several decades after the events this volume covers, we drew on the ample literature of memoirs, biographies, oral histories, academic monographs, and journalistic accounts on the Nixon-Ford era. These works provide context and background and are cited frequently. We also benefited from the availability of declassified records released by the Nixon and Ford presidential libraries and records published in the 67 *Foreign Relations of the United States* series covering the period. However, one drawback of this overall source base for the 1973–1977 period, and the literature based on it, is a heavy focus on the White House and Henry Kissinger. Nixon's presidential recordings (which ended abruptly in July 1973), transcripts of Kissinger's telephone conversations, and minutes from many interagency meetings have long been available to scholars. Two of Kissinger's three massive volumes of memoirs chronicle his recollections on the term shared by Nixon and Ford, and naturally emphasize his role in developing and executing policy. The two presidents wrote memoirs, but the defense secretaries feature less prominently in those works than one might expect given the nature and seriousness of the challenges the two chief executives faced. For example, writers have concentrated on Elliot Richardson's role as attorney general and how he resisted Nixon's demand to fire Watergate special counsel Archibald Cox, rather than on his brief tenure as defense secretary. Rumsfeld's relatively short Pentagon tenure during the Ford administration has received substantial attention, but mostly from scholars seeking to find antecedents for his approach during his second and more controversial tenure during the George W. Bush administration from 2001 to 2006. Rumsfeld is unique among the three secretaries in that he published three books on different aspects of his career. Each offers useful insights on his first brief service as defense secretary under Ford, but taken as a whole, the majority of his recollections cover his later service.

James Schlesinger served the longest of the three men during the Nixon-Ford term—nearly two and a half years as secretary, compared to less than five months for Richardson and just over one year for Rumsfeld. His tenure spanned some of the most significant crises of the period, including Nixon's resignation, the Arab-Israeli War, and the fall of Saigon. Schlesinger mostly appears in the existing literature as a bit player rather than the central character he was in the dramatic upheavals and international crises of his time. This scholarly neglect is a consequence of his management style as secretary, the limited public availability of DoD records, and Schlesinger's decision not to write a memoir. Compared to many of his predecessors and successors, Schlesinger left relatively few written records from his time in office. He rarely commented on memos sent up by staff and did not make extensive use of personal memoranda to manage the department as did his successor, Donald Rumsfeld.

We endeavored to fill such gaps by consulting transcripts of oral interviews that OSD historians conducted with President Gerald Ford, the three defense secretaries, and many top civilian and military officials from the Nixon-Ford years. While even the most well-intentioned interviewee often misremembers specific details, these interviews are essential for understanding the effects that personal relationships and first-hand perspectives had on policy making. For instance, the depth of the personal enmity between Schlesinger and his deputy, the politically connected Texan and former oilman William Clements, and later between Rumsfeld and Clements, becomes clearer through these interviews than from the documentary record alone. Throughout the book, such understanding helps explain why Clements and Schlesinger often made contrasting recommendations in interagency meetings (highly unusual for a defense secretary and his deputy), and why Kissinger often went directly to Clements to achieve policy aims. Rumsfeld's difficulty with Clements also helps to explain his decision to recruit Robert Ellsworth to fill the second deputy secretary of position (vacant since its creation in 1972) to handle intelligence matters and represent him at interagency meetings.

As with the other volumes in this series, files of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (designated Record Group 330 by the National Archives and Records Administration [NARA]) provided the backbone of the research for this book. Most important within that vast body of OSD archival records were memoranda and other papers sent to and from the secretaries of defense, captured and preserved in yearly collections called the Official Records of the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense. Within these records were unique sources vital to understanding Schlesinger's thoughts at critical points during his tenure, including the abundant handwritten notes taken of his telephone calls and meetings by his junior military assistant, Brig. Gen. Robert Taylor; transcripts that the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs produced of Schlesinger's conversations with foreign officials; long, discursive memoranda that circulated among OSD officials in a pre-email era; and the many transcripts that captured what Schlesinger said at interagency meetings.

The Library of Congress holds collections of Schlesinger's and Rumsfeld's papers. Regrettably we did not have access to the Rumsfeld Papers while preparing this volume. The Schlesinger papers proved crucial, however, especially the notebooks of Schlesinger's senior military assistant, Maj. Gen. John Wickham (who later rose to the rank of general and served as chief of staff of the Army under President Ronald Reagan). When combined, the Taylor notebooks from Record Group 330 and the Wickham notebooks from the Schlesinger papers give an invaluable, near daily window into Schlesinger's tenure, including the secretary's unfiltered thoughts on administration colleagues, allies, the budget, members of Congress, and myriad other matters vital to understanding his tenure.[3]

Many of the archival sources, especially those from Record Group 330 and portions of the Schlesinger Papers, remained classified and publicly unavailable at the time of our research. We submitted each chapter to the Defense Office of Prepublication Security Review to ensure its suitability for public release. When information could not be released, the reader will see black bars indicating how much was withheld. These redactions are relatively few considering the size and scope of this volume. Where possible we tried to write from declassified records, but on many topics we relied on classified sources and submitted them for mandatory declassification review. Many of the documents cited in the endnotes have therefore been declassified in whole or in part. For this reason, this volume, like others in the series, is something of preview—a guide to records that are being declassified and will be released. In the absence of detailed finding aids to OSD Records at NARA, the endnotes of this and other volumes in the *Secretaries of Defense Historical Series* serve as useful points of entry for readers interested in exploring records that remain largely untapped by historians of U.S. defense affairs and foreign relations.

This volume seeks to add to the knowledge of the Nixon and Ford years by providing an understanding of the role played by the three secretaries of defense in formulating and implementing national security policy during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history. The chapters that follow reveal the reasons for Richardson's, Schlesinger's, and Rumsfeld's policy successes and failures. These three secretaries displayed great strengths and flaws but were dedicated public officials committed to restoring American military power and developing the All-Volunteer Force in its infancy. Their efforts preserved U.S. military capabilities eroded by inflation and strained by public skepticism, and in doing so established a foundation for future presidents and secretaries of defense.

Endnotes

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1. On the aspects that make the job of secretary of defense "nearly impossible," see Charles A. Stevenson, *SECDEF: The Nearly Impossible Job of Secretary of Defense* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2007).

2. Richard Nixon, Address to the Nation About the Watergate Investigations, 30 Apr 1973, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1973* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), 134 (quote).