Reflective Statement

The class was “HIS344H1: Conflict and Cooperation in the International System Since 1945” taught by Professor Timothy Sayle, and the assignment was a 3,000-word research essay to be written using Chicago Manual of Style 16th edition. The primary focus of this assignment was on primary sources, and newly declassified government records in particular, that help explain state policies.

I am interested in the Cold War and wanted a related topic that would yield relatively recently declassified documents. The Vietnam War ended in 1975 and a (very) rough estimate of thirty years for declassification meant there would be some discoverable documents that had not yet been widely discussed by historians. I began online in the University of Toronto Library system to pinpoint materials relating to the Vietnam war, and ended up reviewing a selection of likely-looking books at the John W. Graham Library. By the time this assignment concluded, I had also searched online through the American President Project, hosted by the University of California, Santa Barbara, the Foreign Relations of the United States, a project of the University of Wisconsin-Madison (“FRUS”), the National Security Archives based in Washington, D.C. (“NSA”), and the Nixon Presidential Library, administered by the National Archives.

Prior to this assignment, I had attended library workshops, including “Finding Scholarly Sources” and “Use Sources” as well as two archival workshops facilitated by librarians with the E. J. Pratt Library. Early in the term, Professor Sayle provided the class with a document titled
“Archives” that was prepared by Dr. John Dirks and contained a lengthy list of useful primary source resources for international relations and diplomatic history courses. It was from my reading of this document that I became aware of presidential libraries and FRUS, and that these were all online. The class also received a presentation by Courtney Lundrigan, Instructional and Reader Services Librarian with the John W. Graham Library, about the use of libraries for research, evaluating information, and how to use services and primary sources. She also explained the “RADAR” technique for citing primary documents: “Rationale, Authority, Date, Accuracy, Relevance.” I found this presentation to be very useful as I progressed through the assignment. On October 25, 2017 I attended the Munk School of Global Affairs for a speech by Thomas Blanton, Director of the NSA, and was intrigued by his description of this digital repository of documents on American foreign policy. He suggested it was indispensable for scholars of the Cold War period and I certainly found that to be true for my assignment. His speech prompted me to look for my topic in the NSA. Finally, on several occasions during this assignment, I met with Professor John Stowe at the Victoria College Writing Centre to discuss elements of the paper including how to describe my research.

Following my review of materials at the John W. Graham Library, and after attending Thomas Blanton’s speech, I searched through Vietnam War documents online in the NSA. By this point I had become interested in the how and the why of the end of the war, in part because there was nothing approaching consensus among historians as to whether the end of the conflict was a “lost victory” (Guenter Lewy and William Colby) or was always completely unwinnable (John Prados and George Herring). I decided that I wanted to put the personal accounts of President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger into conversation
with other published primary and secondary documents concerned with the end phase of the Vietnam War. While looking at these various documents, I found some incongruity between NSA files and Nixon/Kissinger memoirs with respect to a planned (but abandoned) military campaign called Operation Duck Hook. The NSA documents had been declassified in 2007 and largely ignored, yet they contradicted Nixon and Kissinger in significant ways. This was clearly my topic. From this point, I went to articles and books by Jeffrey P. Kimball, who is well-known for his work with NSA documents, and from there I cross-referenced back and forth between various NSA documents and first-hand accounts by Nixon, Kissinger, and Nixon’s Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman. I had a desire to use a wide range of sources if possible and tendrils from the core of this topic spread out to the American President Project, FRUS, and the Nixon Presidential Library. I also tried wherever possible to return to primary sources before I would reach for a conclusion and I made only careful use of personal recollections and memoirs because they are usually biased.

The end result, “Nixon and Vietnam: It Really Was a Duck Hook,” was interesting to research and write, and the feedback from Professor Sayle and the audience at the Vic Research Day was that it is interesting to read as well. Putting the personal accounts together with the recently declassified documents of record in the NSA and reading them all very closely, resulted in some fresh insight into Nixon’s decision to abandon South Vietnam.