

Mark Stoller
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Interviewer
Mark Greenberg

MG It is February 8, 1989 speaking with Professor Mark Stoller at the University of Vermont. This is Mark Greenberg for the Green Mountain Chronicles, Vermont Historical Society. And we're going to talk about the Aiken Formula myth and reality. Let's start right where you were just talking Mark. According to you, the popular conception, well why don't we state what the popular conception is.

MS The popular conception is that Aiken declared on October 19, 1966 on the floor of the U.S. Senate that the United States should simply declare a victory in Vietnam and get out. And this became the Aiken Formula for Vietnam. People refer to it as "Henceforth and the great wisdom of the Senator in coming up with this, the Burlington Free Press at the time had an editorial that said he must be joking. And it quickly took on legendary proportions as the only sane thing to be said about the war and fed into Aiken's reputation not as a hawk or a dove, but as a wise old owl in regard to the Vietnam War. What he said was indeed wise, but in that speech, Aiken did not call for a precipitous withdrawal from Vietnam.

MG What did he, what did he actually say as you're researched it?

MS What he called for was a deescalation of American goals. In a sense a de-escalation of goals that would match the enclave strategy then being suggested by General Gavin. His argument was that the original goal in intervening militarily had been to prevent a victory by the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. They would have placed American forces in the area in obvious peril, obvious danger. That the escalation that Johnson had undertaken since 1965 had indeed checked the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, but that somehow the goal had escalated to victory, military victory. Aiken had always opposed militarization of the Vietnam War. He felt it was counterproductive, felt it would not work. This did not begin in 1966. And he felt what had happened that goals had got, that Johnson had escalated the goals to, to a point where he was unable to achieve them. He wanted a de-escalation of the war. Gavin had suggested withdrawing American troops from the countryside, placing them in enclaves along the coast which the United States would not give up until the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were ready to negotiate on American terms. What I see Aiken suggesting here is a de-escalation of American goals to match this de-escalation strategy so that there could be a military withdrawal eventually and as he put it, "A political solution to the problem."

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MG How then did that get so quickly transformed into the Aiken Formula popular mythology? Yea, that's not a bad idea. Is this going to stop?

MS _____ and see if it. In declaring that the United States had now won. President would declare had won, avoiding the feat, maintaining control of the battlefield and preventing any potential enemy from getting into a position to establish its authority over the South. This declaration will be accompanied by the "gradual re-deployment of American forces," around "strategic centers", and by the substitution of intensive recognizance for bombing. Aiken emphasized that re-deployment was in no way equivalent to a _____ or even to a phased withdrawal of American forces. To the contrary, those forces would have to stay in Vietnam, "for some time." What the re-deployment combined with the statement of victory and sensation of bombing would do was remove the issue of face or credibility as a factor precluding negotiations, force the burden of further escalation onto the enemy and open the door to resumption of what Aiken labeled the political warfare which had properly characterized the early American involvement in Vietnam.

MG So this was actual, an actual political military strategy and yet it seems that what really stopped was this idea of declaring victory, that was a sort of a rhetorical gimmick?

MS Uh huh.

MG A way of saving face?

MS Why actually the declaring victory part I think should stick. That it was a way of saving face, but I think it was something beyond that. I maybe reading too much into what Aiken said in terms of my own studies, but it appeared that Aiken was aware of the fact in a war, when you are in a way, there is a tendency for goals as well as military operations to escalate and to escalate out of control. Aiken had witnessed this during the Korean conflict. Goals began south of the 30 parallel escalated and you wound up with a Chinese intervention in the war, something that scarred every Senator and Congressman who was around at that time. I think Aiken feared that this was going to happen again, that he saw the Johnson administration escalating goals, leading to a level that was a) un-achievable and 2) would invite another Chinese entry and a repeat of the Korean War. So he wanted a de-escalation because he realized the goals were getting out

of, out of hand, but also it was a way to save face. And what Johnson was doing was painting himself into a corner. And the declare of victory part is correct. The part that I say is not correct is and get out. And this lead to confusion later because during the Nixon presidency, Aiken backed Nixon in Vietnam. And a lot of his Democratic colleagues said, "Well I'm just _____ the Aiken formula. And Aiken's comment was, "And where were you in 1966?" I did not say a _____ withdrawal. In fact in one speech, Aiken said American troops would have to remain in Vietnam for some time because while Vietnam may not have originally been important, our very presence there had made it important. There was an issue of face that had to be dealt with. Vietnam was now important he said, "If only because we so foolishly made it so." And he thus would not agree to a _____ withdrawal of American forces and he totally backed Nixon's gradual phased withdrawal of American forces.

MG He, let's see, in the notes that I have, you are quoted here. And this was put together by Jeff Potash?

MS Yea.

MG Well he mentions that Aiken himself in a 1979 interview with Charlie Morrissey, so this is a decade later, recalled that in the fall of 1966, "I suggested to President Johnson that we simply say we've won the war and bring the troops home." And in this memo that Lola Aiken gave me, this sort of notes from that time that he put together in '75, he said, "And in October, 1966, I spoke on the floor of the Senate recommending that the time had come for us to say that we had won the war and withdraw our military forces from that area in an orderly manner." Okay that's seems to be the critical thing, "the orderly manner."

MS I think so. Yea.

MG But yet, the Morrissey quote and of course all I have is this disembodied quote, suggested to me and in talking with Lola too, that this idea of the Aiken Formula caught on so quickly, that he himself bought into, not exactly what he said, but the popular conception of what he said?

MS That is one possible interpretation. It is possible that that happened. The other on reflection I began to think about this clearly the long run implication is if you're going to declare a victory, that you are going to withdraw your forces. What stuck with me, I had interpreted the speech to mean an immediate withdrawal when it was issued

and when the press spoke about it. Then I saw what Aiken said during the Nixon presidency and it said this doesn't square. So I began to examine the record. Logically his support of Nixon's policy makes sense only in line with the idea that he wanted a phased withdrawal. Now obviously implicit within, the Aiken Formula is eventually American troops are going to withdraw. He never, never had favored the military commitment in Vietnam. Part of his whole philosophy of foreign relations was that a military commitment is usually counterproductive and it has extremely dangerous consequences at home. And he was very much in favor of an economic foreign policy whenever possible, economic aide, political aide. So that implicit within the Aiken Formula is eventually getting out, but I think he was astute enough to realize that what the escalation by the end of 1966, an escalation that was already way above 200,000 men, it was impossible in terms of credibility, in terms of face, in terms of what the issue had become, simply to pull those troops out. There's also the question as to how feasible this was in terms of the long range objectives of the Vietnamese and the Viet Cong. Most scholarship now maintains that the key problem was the United States an independent South Vietnam. North Vietnam did not. What political negotiation over that issue could have taken place, we don't know. By the 1970's many policy makers had given up on that option and simply wanted a "decent interval" to get the last of American forces out. Other policy makers however held firmly to the belief that this had to remain American policy. My own belief is that the only way you could have maintained a viable entity in South Vietnam was to put 2 million American forces in there for a minimum of 25 years or invaded North Vietnam risking the consequences of a Chinese intervention in the process.

MG So again, to come back to the question of how this myth arose.

MS I think it arose partially the way journalists interpreted what he said, partially taking the long range implication of what he said and applying it to the immediate present. What you have here I think is a distortion because it is simpler, it is easier simply to say declare victory, get out now. Rather than say, declare a victory, pull back onto the enclaves, negotiate and have a phased withdrawal of American troops. So I think its a matter of over simplification that took place here.

MG It seems interesting to me that Aiken must have to some extent gone along with this. He didn't try to clarify the record.

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MS No, except he did when, during the Nixon presidency. When, and it was not a member of Congress, but it was some expert who was called into the Foreign Relations Committee and wanted an immediate withdrawal of forces, faster than Nixon was withdrawing them. And Aiken lit into him. And he said, "Senator, I'm just quoting your formula back to me." And he said, "No, you're not and where were you in 1966?" His belief during the Nixon presidency was that the attacks on Nixon were motivated by partisanship. And he strongly believed that Nixon was following the policy he wanted to see followed. Now...

MG Which attacks on Nixon?

MS For not pulling American forces out faster, for continuing the war.

MG I mean there were many attacks.

MS Yea! Yes, Yes, Yes. Yea, part of this, you know, partisanship here plays a role too, but Aiken is such an independent Republican, that I do not think that partisanship was the issue here. I think he firmly believed that Nixon overall was following the appropriate policy. And so he did attempt to clarify it in that respect during the Nixon years.

MG But had he tried to do that prior to Nixon? He still had a year or so of Johnson's presidency between making the speech. And it seems like the Press reaction was fairly immediate. Like this formula...

MS Uh huh.

MG ...was what came out in the news?

MS Yea.

MG It became, it was, it was it and it would seem the time to speak up...

MS Uh huh.

MG ...would have been right then. Now what I, I wondered, do you know anything say about the character of the man or his method of dealing with things that might help to explain that?

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MS It's a good question. I think you have to remember that Aiken was a politician, understood very well the way politics works and that a large number of Aiken's moves in the Vietnam War as in all other areas were not direct. There was some indirection here and a lot of it had to deal with the politic climate in situation within Washington. For example, if you look at the Congressional Record, and the speeches that Aiken makes and the speeches that Mansfield makes, Aiken and Mansfield are very close. This is Mike Mansfield of Montana. They have a very similar view of the Vietnam War. But each of them is in a bind. Mansfield, considering his very high status in the Senate and in the Democratic party cannot attack the President of the United States. In the Lyndon Johnson Library, you will see Mansfield's memoranda, long memoranda to Johnson begging for a de-escalation. Okay. Aiken can attack the President. Aiken, as a Senior Member of the Republican Party cannot attack members of the Republican Right who are calling for an escalation and thus reenforcing the President, pushing him in that direction. Individuals, such as Gerald Ford and Melvin Laird at this time. Mansfield can. And what you will see happening is that Aiken will give a speech attacking the President of the United States. Mansfield will say, "The Senator from Vermont has given us much food for thought." Mansfield will make a speech attacking the Republican Hawks. Aiken will say, "The Senator from Montana has given us much food for thought." Support by indirection, rather than the direct method. In terms of when Aiken spoke realized the escalation is going on at the moment Johnson is speaking. If people think this means an immediate withdrawal, why not let them think that. Again, I am making simply an educated guess here in terms of what may have happened. Will you hold it for me.

MG Sure. Okay, so you have uncovered some more precise information?

MS Yea, I was just looking at some of my old notes and writings on this. Aiken emphasized in the speech that the re-deployment was in no way equivalent to a _____ or even a phased withdrawal. He said during the speech American forces would have to stay in the South "for some time." In the ensuing months, he continued to press his formula and simultaneously he emphasized that American forces would have to remain in Vietnam for at least 15 years and perhaps until the end of the century. He insisted that total withdrawal at this point was just as unrealistic as total victory. Whether that is what he really believed or whether he was saying that to maintain credibility within the Washington environment, one can

_____ for oneself. But the statements both in the Congressional Record and in letters to his constituents I think are quite clear on this. The other interesting thing is that by mid-1967, he had totally given up on the White House listening to him. In fact he said at that point he had no more advice to give the White House. "They would not take it if I gave it, so what is the use of my wasting my breath?"

MG I wonder whether the whole way in which the formula came out and stuck had a lot to do with the fact that here was this white haired dean of the Senate from Vermont known for his frugality, his taciturnity, it just seemed the kind of thing if one were writing a story about such a character is the kind of thing that such a character might say?

MS Yes. Aiken obviously was aware of the image he had. The extraordinary thing about him is that the image matched the personality. To be aware of it doesn't mean that it was a put on. Too many comments, too many times, that just fit in perfectly with that image. It should also be pointed out that the idea of a de-escalation of goals and withdrawal, gradual phased withdrawal was nothing new. Numerous people were saying this at the time and had been saying it for quite awhile. What Aiken was able to do was summarize it into that single sentence which made everybody turn around and say, "Well wait a minute." In fact that one, the Aiken speech is so similar to what Mansfield is saying to Johnson in private memoranda that you begin to wonder what is, you know, what is the exact relationship between the two of them. There are no papers to trace that. They had breakfast together every morning, talked over their ideas. But they were quite similar in their beliefs on Vietnam. This led some newspaper journalists to conclude that what Mansfield thinks, Aiken says on the floor of the Senate. I think that's a gross overstatement. Aiken had his own long held ideas about Foreign Policy. Mansfield was the "expert" on Southeast Asia. But Aiken had long held ideas about Foreign Policy in general and his statements about Vietnam fit into those long held ideas, "Avoid military commitment if at all possible. Use your strengths which are primarily economic to achieve your objectives." And always tremendous fear of what militarization would do to the American political system at home in terms of _____ of executive power.

MG Who actually coined the term, do you know, "Aiken Formula?"

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MS I have absolutely no idea about that one. It might be possible to trace it by looking at newspaper accounts and seeing where it came up. But I wish I could help you, but I can't. I can tell you that when he gave the address, one Democratic Senator, I believe it was Frank _____ of Ohio realized that Aiken was not calling for complete withdrawal and actually said, "Aren't you calling for really an adoption of Gavin's enclave strategy?" And he said, "Yes." And added that it may be a far fetched proposal, but nothing else has worked.

MG Okay, I think what I need for the record is, so I can properly identify you, oh before that. Were you, were you in Vermont at the time?

MS No I was not. I arrived at Vermont, in Vermont in 1970.

MG Uh huh.

MS When this was, when this took place, I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

MG Okay. Now if you could tell me you know, what your title is, anything that you think should be known about you.

MS Okay. My name is Mark Stoller. I'm a Professor of History at the University of Vermont. My field of specialization is U.S. Diplomatic and Military History. My primary research area is American Strategy and Foreign Policy during the Second World War and in the origins of the Cold War. I have also been doing work on George Aiken's tenure on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and his work in foreign affairs which has gotten me into some research on the Vietnam War.

MG Okay, that's good. The only thing that remains is if we sit quietly for about 30 seconds. I need to record the sound of the room.

MS Understood.

MG Okay, this is continuing with Mark Stoller.

MS I just wanted to add that what maybe unfortunate about the legend of the Aiken Formula and there was an Aiken Formula. I'm not saying that there was no Aiken Formula, but the Aiken Formula did not include an immediate total withdrawal of American forces. And from the moment he uttered the statement down into the Nixon years, he consistently stated that, that he was not calling for an immediate withdrawal and that American troops would have

to remain for many many years. Not because it was worth it in and of itself, because once you've committed that many forces, made the area important, you could not then simply back away. But what maybe unfortunate is that the Aiken Formula is what George Aiken is remembered for now in regard to decent against the Vietnam War. My own research shows that there are many more important aspects of his opposition that should be emphasized rather than his formula. The formula is nice, neat packaged. Before the formula, earlier than J. William Fulbright broke with administration over Vietnam, Aiken opposed the administration's militarization and escalation of the Vietnam conflict. He thereby gave early anti-war sentiment, a degree of respectability and bipartisanship that it might not have otherwise had. He helped to squelch calls for more escalation by Republican Hawks. His opposition may have played a role in Johnson's rejection of an even wider escalation of the conflict. We think of the escalation. We forget the fact that there was even wider escalation possible all the way to the point of nuclear weapons. All of this has been forgotten. Everyone thinks that the first break was Lyndon Johnson. The first break with Lyndon Johnson was J. William Fulbright. It was not, Aiken was voicing opposition while Fulbright was still totally supporting administration policy. Now Aiken did vote for the Tonkin Gulf resolution as did Fulbright, as did Mansfield. But if you take a look at the White House notes on the Congressional Leadership Meeting with the President, he didn't vote for it because he believed in it, but because he realized that presidential actions had left him with no choice. His closing comment at the meeting when Johnson went around and asked who would, who would vote for that and Fulbright said, "I will support it." Aiken comment was, "By the time you send it up there," meaning to the Congress, "there won't be anything for us to do but support you."

MG Can you clarify that? Why?

MS Because Johnson had already ordered the retaliatory strikes against North, North Vietnam. So that Johnson was going to be walking into the Congress. American ships had been attacked twice. The President as Commander and Chief had ordered retaliatory air strikes against the North Vietnamese bases and now he is asking for a Congressional resolution of support. How do you turn him down on that? This is one way the Presidents have traditionally used the power of Commander and Chief to extend their executive powers. The first to use it in this way was President James K. Polk during the Mexican War before war was declared. He sent American troops into disputed territory

and then when hostilities ensued, asked for appropriations and a declaration of war on the grounds American blood has been shed upon American soil. You decent from a President in that situation at your own peril and you usually lose. The two individuals who voted against the Tonkin Gulf resolution, Wayne Morse and Ernest Groening were both defeated for re-election. Similarly those who opposed Polk, had serious political difficulties including one young Illinois Congressman named Abraham Lincoln who questioned what had gone on here. Aiken played within the rules of the game. He understood them. He voted for things he might not have approved of, but knew there was no choice given the political realities that he was surrounded with. In the private conversations, he would make his actual position clear. But he did, as I said, speak out against administration policy in Vietnam under both Kennedy and Eisenhower, made clear that he wasn't for further escalation, but was for de-escalation and demilitarization, worked very closely with Mansfield. All of this, as I said, before Fulbright. Fulbright had his doubts at an early date, but Fulbright was unwilling to voice them at all until the Dominican Republic situation in 1965, then he did. This is lost site of. People simply talk about the Aiken Formula. There is one other thing. Aiken's influence and prestige in the Senate was never quantifiable, but his colleagues all agreed that that influence and prestige was absolutely enormous. He would always quip that that's because his last name began with A, so he was the first one on the roll call to vote. Now can you imagine freshman Senators sitting in there and hear the Senator from Vermont, the white haired Senator from Vermont, this living legend, in 1964, 1965, criticizes militarization and escalation in Vietnam. What is the impact going to be? You look at the Republican platform on the Vietnam war in 1968. It is quite similar to what Aiken was talking about in 1966 and 1967. There is a come back quip of course to the Aiken Formula. Some commentators noted at the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 that everyone at the Paris Peace Accords seemed to have accepted a modified version of the Aiken Formula while the United States continued to gradually withdraw its forces. Everyone who signed the agreement, simultaneously declared a victory.

MG Okay.

MS I think so. Yea, that's all I can think of.

MG Okay.

MS Hopefully.

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MG Great.

MS Okay. Sorry, one last thing. Aiken consistently defended Nixon against his Senate detractors. He did oppose the Cambodian and Laotian invasions, but in relatively mild terms and simultaneously he defended the constitutionality of Nixon's use of force. He also attacked all Senate time tables for withdrawal as abuses of legislative power. He felt the pendulum was swinging in the other way. He backed the 1972 bombing of North Vietnam on the grounds that Hanoi had launched a full scale invasion of the South. He consistently reminded his colleagues of the steadily decreasing number of U.S. troops and deaths in Vietnam and he sarcastically implied that their conversion to his 1966 ideas was motivated by partizan politics. As far as I see, these stands are not breaks with the past, they are continuations of it. Once again showing that the Aiken Formula was not for an immediate withdrawal. Had he had his own way, American troops would never have been introduced into South Vietnam in the first place. What he favored was the Eisenhower policy in South Vietnam. Economic aide, build up Diem. From day one, he was opposed to what Kennedy and Johnson were doing. Now, people might argue that what that avoids is the, is the problem that what Kennedy and Johnson faced was the fact that the Eisenhower policy had failed and that the Diem government was about to fall. And that after that you were fully committed. On this, I don't think I can offer an answer. But as you look at the records clearly, the White House felt that if it did not intervene militarily, Diem was finished. And after the assassination of Diem, whatever South Vietnamese government existed was finished. Also, as we now look at the record, there are two things that that drive the policy. 1) Avoid a humiliating defeat. And this says Aiken was right. The original introduction of American ground forces are partially designed to prevent the Vietcong and North Vietnamese from winning right at that point. To go for victory is another matter. That's going to require massive forces and Aiken sees the United States creeping into that escalation of objectives with disastrous repercussions. Why avoid humiliating defeat in addition to the ego and _____ involved. Everyone remembers the McCarthy era. Everyone remembers the "Who Lost China Syndrome," including Richard Nixon because he rose the power partially on that and what they're each doing is looking over their shoulder saying, "I can't allow this." Johnson was primarily concerned with his Great Society Program. Why did he escalate the war? To prevent the United State back forces from losing, so that a "Who Lost China Syndrome" could be used against him to destroy his Great Society Program. There were

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other factors involved here, but it needs to be understood how this war was fought, how the administration perceived it, etc. Aiken, I think clearly saw the dangers of militarization and escalation. He tried to do everything he could and the Aiken Formula fit in. As, what the Aiken Formula actually said I think fit in very nicely with the position he had held all all along. And Aiken is, maybe the nicest compliment is to say of a true conservative, conserve. What's conserve mean? He's a realist. Had he had his way, the United States would have never sent troops in. They are in, America is committed, stop it from getting out of hand, but don't think you can rewrite history. And for that, and for everything else I've mentioned, I think he should be re-remembered and remembered well for all he accomplished and all he was able to do. And of course his accomplishments stem far, go far beyond the Vietnam War in terms of Foreign Policy and go far beyond Foreign Policy in terms of his career within the Senate, but that's another story.

MG Okay.