1969: Nixon's Opportunity



Jason Frantz
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Prof. Glickstein
Prof. Logevall

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Introduction

One of the most memorable sights in recent American history is the picture of South Vietnamese citizens hanging from the bottom of an American helicopter as it lifted off from the roof of the United States Embassy in Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, while throngs of Vietnamese surrounded the building begging to be evacuated. Could America's tragic involvement in the Vietnam War have been ended before it reached this point? The Vietnam conflict has been one of the most debated issues in the history of the United States. To this day, over twenty-five years after the scene where the last Americans left South Vietnam, the subject brings on heated debate. It is arguably the only war that the United States has lost. The war, with its vast physical destruction and massive bloodshed, continues to haunt Americans into the twenty-first century.

Of the many so-called turning points during the United States' twenty-five year involvement in Vietnam, the early months of 1969 rank among the most important. United States involvement in Vietnam was at its height and a new President and party had been elected to power in the United States. What would he do? Nixon, Kissinger, and their supporters argue that they took the only course that was available to them. Critics charge that instead of ending the war, as he promised in his campaign, Nixon in fact escalated American involvement. Still others, including several prominent historians, come down in a vaguely defined middle, acknowledging the complexity of the situation Nixon faced in early 1969, but giving little sense of what his options were.

This paper uses archival sources, along with material drawn from some of the leading scholars of the Vietnam War, to consider what options Nixon indeed had in those

key early months. Some of Nixon's friends urged him to announce a quick and orderly withdrawal of all American forces, and then denounce the entire American engagement in Vietnam as a mistake made by the previous Democratic administrations. His campaign was full of hope and vague promises to end the war. Yet he did not end it in the precipitous fashion that many hoped for. In his memoirs, Nixon explained that this was not an option. "We simply could not sacrifice an ally in such a way. If we suddenly reneged on our earlier pledges of support, because they had become difficult or costly to carry out, or because they had become unpopular at home, we would not be worthy of the trust of other nations and we certainly would not receive it."[1]

Nixon was right in one sense: the United States could not just abandon thousands of people who depended on it. This was something I had not pondered. While I will never really understand Nixon's intentions, I believe I now have a good grasp of what he faced. I feel that many of Nixon's ideas were correct. However, I also believe that he chose, or was led to choose, the wrong path to achieve his goal of peace with honor.

While Nixon's argument was credible, Johnson was also very convincing when he wrote in *Vantage Point* "we had kept our word to Southeast Asia" by opposing Communist aggression.[2] What Nixon did not understand, or possibly chose to ignore, was that many of America's allies agreed with Johnson. Furthermore, our European allies were faced with a Soviet Union that had, for the first time, matched the United States in nuclear capabilities. My research indicates that our closest allies in Europe wanted us to concentrate less on Southeast Asia and more on Europe and the Middle East, where the Soviet Union had been making inroads. In fact, according to journalist

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[1] Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York" Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 348.
[2] Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas), 400.

Walter Isaacson, the United States' "futile quest" in Vietnam squandered the true source of its influence: "its moral authority, its sense of worthy purpose, and its reputation as a reasonable and sensible player."[3]

Nixon faced a complicated situation when he became President. The United States had over a half-million troops in Vietnam, there was an increasing opposition, at home and abroad, to America's involvement in the war, and Nixon's options were poor. Ultimately, however, the only sensible option would have been a more rapid plan for troop withdrawal (though not complete) combined with Vietnamization, continued bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, naval blockades, and a renewal of the bombing raids in the North. Nixon's indecisiveness on the matter would cost thousands of American lives.

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[3] Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 161.

Background

No one can deny that Nixon took over a difficult situation in Vietnam when he became President in 1969. Since 1965, Johnson had escalated United States involvement in the air and on the ground. By the time of Nixon's inauguration, there were over a half-million US troops in South Vietnam. In addition, owing to a large Communist offensive in January 1968, domestic reactions to the war had become more dramatic.

Nixon had a reputation as an anti-Communist and a hawk. According to historian Jeffrey Kimball, "from February 1964, when he claimed Johnson was preparing Americans for 'retreat or defeat,' to December 1967, when he advocated retaliation against China if aircraft based there attacked U.S. armed forces, Nixon's themes [concerning Vietnam] were relentlessly militant." Nixon justifiably believed that the division over Vietnam at home gave the North Vietnamese hope that the United States would be forced to pull out due to popular discontent, and that the division was thus a major factor in prolonging the war. Furthermore, Nixon disagreed with Johnson's policy of "gradual escalation" of the war because he thought it could lead to World War III. According to Kimball, Nixon's attitudes towards Vietnam began to develop during the Korean War because Vietnam was a situation very similar to the one Eisenhower had inherited from Truman: an Asian civil war, bogged-down negotiations, a "client" government unwilling to accept a compromise, and an unhappy American public. Nixon preferred to use "massive pressure," but he no longer supported the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, in part owing to the lack of "dominant American nuclear superiority." In October 1967 Nixon told ex-President Eisenhower that he thought

Johnson should mine North Vietnamese harbors in order to cut them off from their supplies.[4]

On January 30, 1968, during a cease-fire for the Tet holiday, the Communists launched a series of attacks extending from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to the southern tip of Vietnam. In Saigon, where the United States embassy had been attacked, allied troops beat back the National Liberation Front (NLF) forces and cleared the city within a few days, inflicting heavy casualties and taking numerous prisoners. The result was the same throughout most of South Vietnam. What became known as the Tet Offensive led Johnson to send an additional 10,500 men along with an assurance to General Westmoreland that additional troops would be sent to meet any other threat.[5]

Westmoreland's assessment was that the Communists had failed. He boasted that "the enemy exposed himself by virtue of his strategy and he suffered heavy casualties." To this, a crowd of reporters crooned with disbelief.[6] United States officials, military or otherwise, had made similar optimistic comments since Kennedy sent "advisers" to Vietnam in the early sixties. The Tet offensive opened the American public's eyes to the harsh fact that the war was not going as planned. From a tactical standpoint, Westmoreland was actually correct. However, Tet was a political victory for the Communists because of the reaction of the American public.

In two weeks of fighting, American television viewers saw the police chief of Saigon execute a Vietcong suspect and they heard an American officer utter the

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[4] See: Kimball, 16-8, 29; Edward W. Knappman, *Presidential Election 1968* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1970), 13, 23; and Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 289.
[5] George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, Third Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1996), 208-10.
[6] Herring, 203.

remarkable words "we had to destroy the village in order to save it."[7] The public was shocked and the media only compounded the situation by showing events in a negative light. Early reports of Communist victories, when the Americans had actually beaten them back, went largely uncorrected by the media, and reports that the United States had inflicted heavy casualties were usually not announced.[8] After Tet, polls showed that 78 percent of the public did not think that the United States was making progress in the war and that only 26 percent approved of Johnson's handling of the situation.[9] The slide in Johnson's approval rating would have a huge effect on the United States Presidential election campaign of 1968.

The 1968 campaign began in late 1967 when George Romney, the Republican Governor of Michigan, announced his candidacy. The Republican competition would later be taken over by Nixon and Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York, while the Democratic campaign was complicated by numerous events. First, Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy announced his intention to run against President Johnson on a peace platform. Then Robert Kennedy entered the race. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey joined the race when Johnson announced that he would not seek reelection. The shock created by Johnson's announcement was overshadowed when Kennedy was assassinated, stripping many of the Democrats of their true nominee hopeful. The candidacy of former Governor George Wallace of Alabama as an Independent only complicated the situation further because of his popularity.

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[7] Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time For War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 286.
[8] Herring, 218.

1968 –Nixon's Campaign

Nixon spelled out his intentions concerning the war throughout his campaign. During the New Hampshire primaries, he proclaimed that if the war was not over by November, "the American people will be justified to elect new leadership, and I pledge to you the new leadership will end the war." Nixon, however, did not advocate either American withdrawal or the use of nuclear weapons. He wanted to use economics and diplomacy, especially with China and the Soviet Union, while maintaining military pressure to bring an end to the war.[10]

What exactly did Nixon intend to do? He would not say. Nixon would not indulge reporters with specifics on his plan to end the war. In early March he told reporters that "no one with this responsibility who is seeking office should give away any of his bargaining positions in advance."[11] He did not want to be "bound" later on by statements that he had made earlier. This would be a position that he would stick to, although his motivation was not so valiant; instead, he kept quiet because he did not yet know what his plan was.

On March 31, Johnson made an announcement that was crucial to Nixon's campaign. First, Johnson pledged a bombing halt north of the nineteenth parallel in order to facilitate peace negotiations with Hanoi. Second, in order to concentrate all of his efforts on his goal of peace, Johnson announced his decision not to seek reelection. The

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[9] Schulzinger, "It's Easy to Win a War on Paper: The United States and Vietnam1961-1968," *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations During the 1960s*, Diane Kunz (editor) (New York: Columbia University Press), 208. (henceforth referred to as Schulzinger, *Diplomacy*).

[10] Knappman, 50.

[11] Knappman, 50

country was shocked, but many observers saw the bombing halt as an excellent opportunity for peace.

Nixon had previously scheduled a nationwide radio address for the same evening, in which he had planned to outline his views on the Vietnam War (despite his statements about not giving away his bargaining position). According to his memoirs, Nixon was going to propose that the US lean on the Soviets to reduce their support of North Vietnam. In addition, he had intended to deliver a "sharp critique" of the Johnson policy of gradualism.[12] Nixon had to cancel the speech because he wanted to "avoid anything that might even inadvertently, cause difficulty for our negotiators." He believed the bombing halt to be risky, but he also assumed that Johnson's actions were "based on private diplomatic information available only to the government," and that "delicate diplomatic moves are now under way, possibly involving the Soviet Union;" which he saw as the "key to peace in Vietnam."[13] Historian Robert Mann presents a different view of the situation. He indicates that Johnson's withdrawal from candidacy let Nixon "off the hook" and "devalued" Vietnam as an issue for Kennedy and Humphrey, allowing Nixon to remain silent on the issue.[14]

In what would become a common, and a useful, campaign ploy, Nixon alluded to the Korean War. He explained that the United States suffered more casualties in the Korean War "after peace talks began," and thus the war in Vietnam was being fought "to make possible the conditions of a wider and durable peace." He realized that it was a time for hope, but he feared "the temptation of a camouflaged surrender."[15] From this

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[12] Nixon, 300.
[13] Knappman, 67.
[14] Robert Mann, *A Grand Delusion: America's Decent into Vietnam* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 607.
[15] Ibid.

point on Nixon sought a moratorium on discussion about Vietnam in order to avoid conflict with Johnson's peace efforts.

Nixon, however, could not hold his tongue for the entire campaign. A few days before the Republican National Convention in August, he hinted that the NLF, which had *not* been recognized as a legitimate government, could be represented in negotiations. He declared: "I believe the negotiating table must be big enough and the issues broad enough so that we can reach a negotiated settlement of the war on an honorable basis." He continued to give a mixed message, however, adding: "I certainly do not seek the Presidency for the purpose of presiding over the destruction of the credibility of the American power throughout the world."[16] Nixon remained ambiguous throughout the campaign, though more and more the issue of American credibility would become central to his thinking on the war.

On August 8, Nixon gave a speech accepting the G.O.P. nomination for President, one that was full of promises for change if he were elected. "When the strongest nation in the world can be tied down for four years in a war in Vietnam with no end in sight," he declared, "then it's time for new leadership for the United States of America." He went on to promise action and a "new policy for peace abroad." In order to reverse the failures of the past Democratic presidencies, he suggested a "complete reappraisal of American policies in every section of the world," adding, "we shall begin with Vietnam."[17]

Nixon then became very critical of Johnson's handling of the situation. "For four years this Administration has had at its disposal the greatest military and economic advantage that one nation has ever had over another in a war." After noting the

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[16] Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Nixon Says He Has Eased Views on Communist Bloc," *New York Times* (hereafter referred to as *NYT*), August 7, 1968, p1c6.

exceptional courage of American men who had been fighting in Vietnam for Johnson, he added, "this Administration has had the support of the loyal opposition for the objective of seeking an honorable end to the struggle." Yet there was still no end in sight. Therefore, Nixon said, it was time for "the American people to turn to new leadership not tied to the mistakes and policies of the past."[18]

Once again, Nixon made reference to Korea and Eisenhower's handling of the situation there. He said he was proud of that Administration's accomplishments, and added that it was exactly that kind of leadership and experience that America needed and "that we will give America." He pledged that his first priority as President of the United States would be to "bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam."[19] Thus Nixon's plan began to take shape and yet remained vague at the same time, which was undoubtedly his intention.

A few weeks after the Republican National Convention, Vice President Hubert Humphrey was selected as the Democratic nominee for President. His position as Vice President, however, did not add strength to his campaign. Arthur Krock of the *New York Times* said, "Nixon was left entirely free to criticize the conduct of the war… [While] Humphrey, was firmly bound to every detail of the President's record in enlarging and pursuing the war, and [more importantly] to his rigid conditions for a negotiated settlement."[20] According to journalist A.J. Langguth, Nixon had "saddled" Humphrey with an "inflexible policy" when, at a meeting with Johnson a few weeks after the

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[17] For transcript of speech, see: *NY T*, August 9, 1968, p20 c1.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Arthur Krock, "Platform Differences," *NYT*, August 29, 1968, p25c7.

Republican Convention, Nixon promised that he would not criticize the Administration's policy in Vietnam if Johnson promised not to soften it.[21] This made it difficult for the Vice President to appease the American voters by shifting his campaign stance on Vietnam. Thus on August 25 Nixon endorsed Johnson's Vietnam policy "without qualification."[22]

The Democratic Convention, held in Chicago in late August, was marked by violent altercations concerning the war. The mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, surrounded the convention center with barbed wire and put the entire 11,000-member police force on twelve-hour shifts. As Humphrey gave his acceptance speech, the Chicago police brutally beat anti war protesters outside the building. Ironically, the nominations of both Nixon and Humphrey left the anti-war movement with no candidate for President.[23] In the days following the convention, Humphrey was concerned with the public's reaction to the repression of the protesters. He defended Daley's handling of the situation, but was then forced to say that he did not "condone the beating of those people with clubs."[24]

On September 9, speaking extemporaneously, Humphrey said that "negotiations or no negotiations, we could start to remove some of the American forces in early 1969 or late 69." He had wanted desperately to distance himself from Johnson's policies on the war and to appear his own man in the elections. This, however, was a very difficult task. Immediately following Humphrey's statement, Secretary of State Dean Rusk repudiated it, and the next day Johnson stated that "no one" could predict when troop

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[21] A.J. Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 514.
[22] Knappman, 158.
[23] Keith L. Nelson, *The Making of Détente: Soviet-American Relations In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 75.

withdrawals could begin.[25] Herein lay Humphrey's main dilemma: as Vice President, he could not openly revoke the President's policies, yet public opinion would not allow him to defend such policies.

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In early September, Johnson agreed to another last–ditch effort to revitalize the stalled Paris negotiations with Hanoi. Whether Nixon's fourteen-point lead over Humphrey in the Harris Poll had an effect on this decision is unclear. In his new effort, Johnson decided to abandon his former requirement that the North "reciprocate" *before* the bombs stopped falling. The Johnson Administration, with good reason, was very suspicious of the Nixon camp and therefore tried desperately to keep the new information secret. What they did not know was that Nixon had already enlisted Harvard professor Henry Kissinger, a Democratic confidant in Paris, in his camp.[26]

Kissinger would later deny this contact, writing in his memoirs that his first contact with the Nixon camp was on November 22, 1968.[27] Nevertheless, he played a key role in the Nixon campaign before the election. On September 26 Nixon told John N. Mitchell, a member of Nixon's staff, that "something big was afoot" in Paris and that he, Nixon, therefore needed to take care when making any statements about Vietnam in the upcoming weeks. Nixon also told his advisers and speechwriters that he wanted to get across the fact that "it was Humphrey rather than the President who was playing politics with the war."[28] Humphrey then stepped directly into Nixon's media trap.

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[24] Theodore H. White, *The Making of a President, 1968* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1969), 334.
[25] White, 335.
[26] Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger In the Nixon White House* (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 17-8; and Langguth, 522-3.
[27] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (henceforth referred to as Kissinger, *WHY*) (Boston: Little. Brown, and Company, 1979), 8.
[28] Kimball, 58.

On September 30 Humphrey gave a pivotal speech in Salt Lake City. By this point in the campaign, he was trailing badly and showed no sign of catching up. This was due, at least in part, to the fact that Humphrey had been rather vague about what Nelson calls "the necessity for peace."[29] Some of his advisers thus suggested that he break away from Johnson. Reluctantly, he did.

In his speech, Humphrey declared that his "first priority shall be to end the war and detain an honorable peace." This was hardly radical. However, Humphrey then broke with Johnson by pledging that he "would stop the bombing of the North [not just above the 19th parallel] as an acceptable risk for peace because I believe it could lead to success in the negotiations." He vowed to push for Communist commitment to restore the DMZ and promised that if the North showed "bad faith" he would "reserve the right to resume the bombing."[30]

Taking Kissinger's advice, Nixon attacked Humphrey's speech. He said that the Vice President had wasted the "trump card" that could be used in Paris. By hinting at what he would do when elected, Humphrey had removed the bombing halt mystique, and thereby undermined Johnson's efforts in Paris. However, Nixon's own position was very similar to Humphrey's and, as Nixon knew from Kissinger, his position was also similar to the very position being taken in Paris, namely that a bombing halt might be used to further negotiations.[31]

A week later, Nixon highlighted Humphrey's tough predicament as the Democratic nominee seeking to gain support among a skeptical American public and as the Vice President who was bound to the past. He said, " We might be able to agree to

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[29] Nelson, 75.
[30] For transcript of speech, see: *NYT* October 1, 1968, p33c1.

much more then [January 1969] than we can do now," especially with regards to Vietnamization. Once again he made reference to Korea and how Eisenhower "did not indicate exactly in 1952 how he would end the [Korean] War."[32] By such statements Nixon sought to discredit Humphrey for his announcements while preserving his own vagueness on the means of achieving peace.

Nixon went on to explain that he favored a "generous" peace and that he had no wish to destroy or even conquer North Vietnam; he was, in fact, willing to help rebuild it. He would not agree to the imposition of a coalition government on South Vietnam, yet he would allow the NLF to participate if they "accepted the democratic process." In addition, Nixon continued, he was against a US pullout "under any kind of subterfuge," which would only encourage the Soviets and the Chinese "to try aggression somewhere else."[33]

A few weeks before, on September 16, Johnson had told the presidential candidates about the secret negotiations that had been taking place in Paris since September 11. He asked them to think of "what was best for their country" and to refrain from public debate on Vietnam.[34] Nixon already knew about the negotiations because of the Kissinger channel, but Johnson's plea to refrain from debate was apparently persuasive.

During a radio speech on October 27, Nixon said he would "do nothing to interfere" with the negotiations. He went on to accuse Humphrey of talking too much about Vietnam in his Salt Lake City speech and having thus "provided a classic example of

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[31] Kimball, 58.
[32] E.W. Kenworthy "Nixon Suggests that he Could Achieve Peace in Vietnam," *NYT* October 8, 1968, p1c1.
[33] Ibid.

what a President must not do during such negotiations." He continued: "a government cannot afford to negotiate and vacillate at the same time." Nixon reiterated his opposition to a coalition government, insisting that it was "not an exercise in cooperation but a sanctuary for subversion," something that would not end the war but would rather "ensure its resumption under conditions that would guarantee Communist victory." Again he announced his acceptance of NLF participation in the wake of real elections.[35]

Meanwhile, the Johnson administration was still seeking peace in Paris. The talks moved at a snail-like pace. Earlier that month, when Johnson indicated that the bombing would cease, Saigon, according to historian Ronald H. Spector, was "faced with the prospect of real negotiations, [and thus] began to drag its feet."[36] An informant in the Republican campaign told the Johnson Administration that the difficulties he was having in Paris "would make it easier for Nixon to settle after January. Like Ike in 1953, he would be able to settle on terms which the president [Johnson] could not accept, blaming the deterioration of the situation between now and January or February on his [Nixon's] predecessor."[37] South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky could sense that the United States was tired of the war and, according to Johnson's Secretary of Defense, Clark M. Clifford, Saigon "did not want the war to end – not while it was protected by half a million troops and a golden flow of money."[38]

Earlier, in March 1968, Johnson had stopped the bombing of Hanoi to get the North Vietnamese to start talking. In order to jump-start the stalled negotiations, Johnson thought it would be a good idea to stop bombing altogether. W. Averell Harriman, head

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[34] White, 387.
[35] Knappman, 207.
[36] Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet: the Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1993.), 299.
[37] Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 272.

of the negotiating team in Paris, argued that the current respite in military action in South Vietnam was a sign of Hanoi's interests in substantive negotiations. In addition, General Abrams had assured Johnson that a bombing halt would not create a significant military threat. Thus, on the night of October 31, 1968, Johnson announced the bombing halt. With the pressure from this concession, Hanoi agreed to talks. According to Kimball, Hanoi agreed to negotiations because of pressure from Moscow about the pending election of Nixon, who had a reputation as a staunch anti-Communist.[39] Journalist Michael Lind indicates that the Soviets advised North Vietnam that it was in their interest to help Humphrey's campaign by "making it appear that peace was near."[40]

Two days later, on November 2, Thieu announced publicly that Saigon would not join the peace talks under present conditions. Privately Thieu argued that his government was not a "car that can be hitched to a locomotive and taken anywhere the locomotive wants to go," adding that the American-arranged negotiations were a "clear admission of defeat." He insisted that Hanoi must agree formally to de-escalate and negotiate directly with Saigon.[41]

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Thieu's decision to block the peace process is a complicated story. Based on the evidence now available, it seems clear that Nixon used back channel communications to urge Thieu that he would be better off waiting until Nixon became President of the United States. Since early 1968, Anna Chennault, the Vice Chairman of the Republican National Finance Committee, was Nixon's intermediary with Thieu. She had brought

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[38] Spector, 299.
[39] Kimball, 59.
[40] Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 131.
[41] Herring, 238.

South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem to see Nixon in July 1968 and Nixon had informed him that his goal was to "end this war with victory." Chennault was used for numerous such meetings, and on November 2, when Thieu was pressured by Johnson to join in the foray, Agnew passed word to Chennault that she should urge Thieu to remain firm.[42]

It now also seems clear that Johnson knew about Nixon's secret communications with Thieu. Apparently Johnson called the three American presidential candidates two hours before his speech on October 31 and vaguely questioned Nixon about the situation.[43] On another occasion, Johnson indicated that "it would rock the world if it were said that Thieu was conniving with the Republicans."[44] Historian Seymour M. Hersh feels that Johnson did not make his knowledge public because of the sensitive nature of the means he used to acquire the information and also because he "had no interest in defeating Nixon" in favor of Humphrey, who had turned his back on Johnson with his Salt Lake City speech.[45] When Johnson heard that his Vice President was veering from his policy, he denounced Humphrey as "weak and disloyal." Furthermore, Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk felt that Humphrey's Salt Lake City speech had scared Thieu.[46]

An intelligence note from Thomas Hughes to Rusk in early November 1968 implied that the US expected Thieu to "block or impede any discussion on substantive issues and minimize the role of the NLF as a separate political entity." Furthermore,

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[42] Anthony Summers, *The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon* (New York: Viking, 2000), 299-304; see also: Steven Ambrose, *Nixon vol II: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 207-16; Mann, 620-23; Kimball, 56-7; Langguth, 524-27.

[43] Kimball, 61.

[44] Langguth, 526.

[45] Hersh, 22.

[46] Langguth 512-4, 526.

according to the letter, Thieu felt the Communists had been dealt "very heavy blows" and that they might be forced to make "major concessions" with the continuance of an aggressive military campaign. The note further suggests Thieu may have felt that, owing to the lack of a central focus on Vietnam during the elections, "the American public is not likely to clamor for a quick US withdrawal or a quick settlement" as long as the negotiations did not appear to be failing.[47] Thus Thieu felt that he should avoid joining the talks regardless of Nixon's appeals.

In historian Anthony Summers's view, Nixon cannot be held solely responsible because Thieu would have shied away from the talks regardless of Nixon's pleas. Summers felt that Thieu, as the intelligence note suggested, had numerous reasons not to participate in the negotiations – not the least of which was the fact that his regime had almost no chance of survival if the US pulled out of Vietnam.[48] In her 1980 autobiography, Anna Chennault admitted that she was in regular contact with the Nixon administration concerning Saigon's understanding of its position. Later she was adamant that Thieu knew he would be better off with Nixon. Yet according to Chennault, Thieu said, "I don't care who's going to be the next President. There are no peace talks in Paris. It's just a smokescreen. I'm not going to Paris until after the elections."[49] Thus, while it is clear that Nixon tampered with the peace process, the effects and significance of his tampering are not clear. Furthermore, according to William Bundy, Johnson's Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Nixon's apparent obligation to Thieu was an

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[47] Intelligence Note (henceforth referred to as IN) from Thomas L Hughes, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State (henceforth DOS), to Secretary of State Rusk, November 7, 1968; Record Group 59 (henceforth RG 59); Central Foreign Policy Files 1967-69 (henceforth CPFP 67-9); box 2815; POL 27 VIET S 11/1/68, General Records of the Department of State (henceforth GRDS); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. (henceforth NACP).

[48] Summers, 297.

[49] Hersh, 21.

enormous burden to Nixon's Vietnam policies; he needed to pressure Thieu into reforming the Government of South Vietnam – using American withdrawal as an incentive – but he was unable to do so because of his "obligation."[50]

Reaction to Thieu's announcement was swift. The *New York Times* wrote that Thieu's insistence led to a cleavage in US-GVN relations. Apparently, several highly placed Vietnamese officials and numerous US diplomats thought the relationship had "deteriorated too much to be repaired easily." Furthermore, anti-Americanism began to spread rapidly among South Vietnamese politicians. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, for example, told a group of Senators on November 3 that the South Vietnamese "can trust the Americans no longer – they are just a band of crooks." He added that the US was "unmasking itself as a true and dirty colonialist power."[51] Another article insisted that because of Thieu's boycott "the Communist side will appear to the world to be more interested in serious talks than the allied side."[52] The uneasy character of the United States-South Vietnam alliance would become a major concern in Congress during the Nixon Administration.

Amidst this scandal and turmoil, Nixon won on November 5, 1968 one of the closest presidential elections in history. He received 31.7 million votes to Humphrey's 31.2 million. Surprisingly, Independent Party candidate George Wallace received 9.9 million votes, which was a very large number considering how close the race was between the two prominent parties. Historian Robert D. Schulzinger believes that "more voters probably wanted to escalate the war than wanted withdrawal" because Wallace, who ran on a pro-war platform, received so many votes. Wallace's running mate, former

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[50] Mann, 630.
[51] Gene Roberts, "US – Saigon Rift on Talks Widens," *NYT* November 11, 1968, p1c6.

Air Force General Curtis Le May, had even expressed the wish to "bomb them [the North Vietnamese] into the stone age."[53] Keith L. Nelson, another historian, feels that the electorate was fragmented by weariness over the war.[54]

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[52] Bernard Gwertzman, "Thieu's Position on Paris Stirs Concern in Capital," *NYT* November 3, 1968, p1c6.
[53] Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 288.
[54] Nelson, 76.

Transition

After the election, Nixon took a brief vacation in Key Biscayne, Florida. On the return trip to his home in New York, he stopped by the White House to meet with Johnson. After dinner, Nixon followed Johnson to the West Wing where the Johnson cabinet waited to brief Nixon. Clifford suggested three alternatives to see the war through to a successful conclusion. He told Nixon that the United States could keep fighting without talking; hold private secret negotiations with Hanoi; or pressure South Vietnam to go to Paris. Clifford supported the last option and suggested that Johnson should also begin to withdraw troops. Nixon gave private and public support to Clifford's plan to pressure Thieu to get to Paris. Meanwhile, Clifford's suggestion of troop withdrawals was overlooked. Ambrose is correct in saying that at his moment, "a great opportunity was lost."[55]

According to Nixon, "the travail of the long war was etched on the faces around me… They had no new approaches to recommend to me. I sensed that, despite the disappointment of defeat, they were relieved to be able to turn this morass over to someone else." After the meeting, Johnson privately told Nixon "the problems at home and abroad are probably greater than any President has ever confronted since the time of Lincoln."[56] As Nixon attended parties celebrating his victory and began to piece together his administration, Johnson had to focus on the negotiations.

An intelligence note to the Secretary of State on November 13 commented on the problems that the Administration was having with Hanoi, despite the announcement of

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[55] Ambrose, 230-31.
[56] Nixon, 336-37.

the bombing halt. North Vietnam, according to the note, was using the bombing halt to "strengthen its own negotiating position and its people's resolve, while at the same time seeking to undermine the South Vietnamese Government and to generate and exacerbate US/GVN suspicions and tensions." Hanoi had also insisted that the bombing halt was "unconditional," which it was not, and that the United States had agreed to talk with the NLF, which it had not done.[57] These disagreements, along with the fact that the Saigon was refusing to join the negotiations, frustrated Johnson's peace efforts.

An article in the *New York Times* also expressed frustration with the situation in Vietnam. Even though allied troops had repelled three enemy offenses against cities and bases, and even though Hanoi had negotiated with the United States on conditions for the bombing halt, there was still irritation over the state of affairs in Vietnam. The frustration came from the fact that the small and exhausted North Vietnam had fought the United States to a draw. Americans were so weary of the war, according to the article, that the "hawk," Nixon, sought any way out of it. Furthermore, the article continued, the "virtually irreversible" bombing halt had limited military and diplomatic positions, and the terms on which it had been arranged had "frightened" Saigon.[58]

After weeks of pressure from the Johnson Administration, Thieu announced on November 27 that he would send negotiators to Paris. According to one Congressman, it seems that Thieu needed more time to "bring along the Vietnamese public, legislative leaders in the national assembly, the military, and other opinion leaders in Viet-Nam."[59]

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[57] IN from Hughes to Rusk, November 13, 1968; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2815; POL 27 VIET S 11/1/68; GRDS; NACP.
[58] Max Frankel, "For the US, Hope and Frustration," *NYT* November 17, 1968, sec IV p2c5.
[59] Correspondence from William B. Macomber Jr., Asst. Sec. for Congressional Relations, to Congressman Clement J. Zablocki, March 7, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2728; POL 27-14 VIET 2/25/69; GRDS; NACP.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, Thieu may have simply been dragging his feet in hopes of getting a better deal under the Nixon Presidency.

South Vietnam's announcement that it would participate in the negotiations again raised the hopes of many in Washington. Others, however, remained skeptical. The pro-Communist Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett, who was known to have close relations with Hanoi and the NLF, advised critics of the Thieu regime against relinquishing their skepticism. Burchett told the press that he saw little hope for a quick settlement of the Vietnam War and that even though Saigon had joined the negotiations, he believed there remained little chance for compromise until the American presence in Vietnam was ended.[60]

The South Vietnamese delegation did not arrive in Paris until December 8, 1968. Once in Paris, Saigon raised procedural problems that again brought the process to a standstill. The problem was over the shape of the negotiating table. Originally, the US had wanted two long tables to convey the two-sided nature of the talks. The North, however, demanded a square table to emphasize that the NLF was a separate party in the negotiations. When Harriman proposed a round table, Hanoi accepted. Thieu, however, would not accept anything that represented the NLF as a legitimate participant.[61]

The National Security Council felt that Thieu was playing hardball because he believed time was on his side. According to the NSC, Thieu believed "that the delay between the bombing halt November 1 and November 27, when he announced his

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[60] Telegram from US Mission USUN, NY to Rusk, November 30, 1968; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2815; POL 27 VIET S 11/15/68; GRDS; NACP.
[61] Herring, 239.

decision to participate, was indispensable to prepare the Vietnamese people for talks."[62] Thieu's special assistant, Nguyen Tien Hung, said that Thieu felt that Nixon "owed him a political debt" because he (Thieu) had withheld support for Johnson's peace initiative.[63] Thus Thieu may have been stalling in order to wait for Nixon to get into office.

Thieu's bickering angered Johnson, who still hoped to end the war under his Administration. Resentment increased on all sides. Johnson White House aide Harry McPherson said that the "American Gulliver is tied down by the South Vietnamese Lilliputians." With a similar note of frustration, North Vietnamese negotiators commented that "usually the man leads the horse. This time the horse is leading the man."[64]

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Nixon was aware that his narrow victory in the election meant that some of his choices for Cabinet posts would have to "serve to unite the country."[65] The most important member of Nixon's entourage would soon become Henry Kissinger, the German-born Harvard professor who had given information concerning Johnson's November bombing halt. As Langguth puts it, the time was ripe for Kissinger to collect for the services he had performed for Nixon during the election.[66]

On November 25, Nixon and Kissinger met at Nixon's "transitions headquarters" on the thirty-ninth floor of the Pierre Hotel in New York. According to Kissinger, Nixon was having organizational problems and he "had very little confidence in the State

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[62] Memo: "Status of Paris Talks:" p3; National Security Council Files (henceforth NSCF); Henry A Kissinger Office Files (henceforth HAKOF); box 6; General Transition Book, vol V – diplomatic – tab A; Richard M. Nixon Materials (henceforth RMNM); NACP.
[63] Kimball, 89.
[64] Herring, 239-40.
[65] Nixon, 338.
[66] Langguth, 528.

Department," in part because the Foreign Service had "disdained him as Vice President and ignored him the moment he was out of office." Nixon then expressed his deep desire to run foreign policy from the White House.[67]

When Kissinger left the hotel he had no precise idea of what Nixon expected from him. The next day he received a call from John Mitchell, a member of the Nixon campaign and later his Attorney General, indicating that he wanted to meet with Kissinger the following day and talk about his new position in the Administration. At the meeting, Mitchell came straight to the point and asked what Kissinger had decided about the National Security job. Kissinger replied: "I did not know I had been offered it." To this Mitchell exclaimed, "Oh Jesus Christ, he [Nixon] has screwed it up again."[68] Kissinger stalled for a few days and then accepted the post of National Security Adviser.

A few days later, on December 2, Nixon announced publicly that Kissinger would be his assistant for national security affairs. This announcement took some of Kissinger's former colleagues by surprise; they remembered his disdain for Nixon while Kissinger was working for Nixon's rival for the Republican nomination, Nelson Rockefeller. Then Kissinger had disliked Nixon's "shallowness" and had claimed he had a "dangerous misunderstanding" of foreign policy.[69]

Kissinger had strong views on what steps should be taken by the President-elect. At a conference on Vietnam in mid 1968, Kissinger had said that the US needed to get out of Vietnam, but that it also needed to assure a "decent interval" between the final evacuation of US troops and the Communist takeover of Vietnam.[70] In his *Foreign*

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[67] Kissinger, *WHY*, 11-2.
[68] Kissinger, *WHY*, 14.
[69] Langguth, 535.
[70] Hersh, 47.

Affairs article released in January 1969, Kissinger explained that the US should work to strengthen and legitimize the GVN and ARVN while the US made an honorable exit. According to Kimball, after the election the Nixon team's policy "did not yet embrace the so-called decent-interval solution" that Kissinger had advocated in his article.[71]

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After the elections, Bui Diem, South Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States and a participant in the Anna Chennault affair, returned to South Vietnam where he found optimism amongst the generals because of the election to the American presidency of a hard-line anti-Communist. However, Diem reported to Thieu that, despite Nixon's election, the Republicans would probably be disengaging, if more slowly than the Democrats, because of increasing public pressure in the United States.[72] In early December, possibly as a response to Diem's report, Thieu indicated that he expected Nixon to "phase out perhaps 50,000-100,000 of its troops" in 1969. He felt the ARVN should be prepared to take up the slack and thus he felt it important to sustain "the momentum of the accelerated pacification counter offensive," which had been showing progress throughout 1968.[73]

In fact, the GVN was becoming more stable and gaining more prestige. Similarly, ARVN was performing better and gaining confidence. According to a National Security Council (NSC) memo, the new "constitutional system" of the Thieu regime had not only survived the harsh year of 1968, but it had actually "grown in strength." The main reason, according to the NSC, was the peaceful transition from a military regime to one

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[71] Kimball, 90.
[72] Langguth, 529.
[73] Telegram from US Embassy Saigon (henceforth Saigon) to Rusk, December 12, 1968; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2815; POL 27 VIET S 12/1/68; GRDS; NACP.

that was "at least equally" civilian, as symbolized by Tran Van Houng, who had become Prime Minister in May 1968. The NSC was careful to point out that the system was still "fragile and vulnerable to both internal divisions and external pressures," despite its new-found confidence.[74].

Another NSC memo focused on Houng's success at defeating corruption, which was a major problem in South Vietnam. According to the NSC, Houng had run a campaign that had "leveled off" overall corruption and had even caused declines in some specific fields. This in turn led to some "popular recognition for its [the Thieu regime's] efforts."[75] Thus the Thieu Government was gaining legitimacy and becoming more stable. This might have led the Nixon team to believe that there was a chance the war could be won. However, if one considers American public opposition to the war at the time, the stability of the Thieu regime should have instead encouraged Nixon to believe that transfer of wartime responsibilities had reached an optimum moment.

It is apparent, however, that Nixon did not see the gains made by the government of South Vietnam as sufficient. In his memoirs, Nixon said that his "commitment to Thieu was a commitment to stability" in South Vietnam, and "that is exactly why the Communists were so insistent upon securing his [Thieu's] downfall as a part of a settlement."[76] According to Kimball, Nixon was "not sentimentally attached to Thieu [because of Thieu's help during the election], but he felt responsible for his survival because he did not want to become the first American president to lose a war."[77]

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[74] Memo: "Political Development in South Viet-Nam;" NSCF; HAKOF; box 6; General Transition Book, vol V – political economic – tab B; RMNM; NACP.
[75] Memo: "Corruption in Viet-Nam;" NSCF; HAKOF; box 6; General Transition Book, vol V – political economic – tab I; RMNM; NACP.
[76] Nixon, 349.
[77] Kimball, 90.

It is also possible that Nixon looked past the optimistic achievements of the Thieu regime toward its faults. During the transition period, Washington and Saigon seemed to have divergent interests. After Johnson stopped the bombing, Saigon, for whatever reasons, refused to join the foray in Paris. Once they finally sent delegates the South Vietnamese stalled on the procedural issues. This led Secretary of State Clark Clifford to insinuate that Saigon was dragging its feet. Then Clifford was bold enough to suggest talks between Hanoi and Washington about mutual troop withdrawals. Similarly, Senator Stuart Symington (D-Missouri) accused Saigon of deliberately staling at the Paris talks and said the United States should set a firm date for starting discussions with North Vietnam "with or without the South Vietnamese." He felt that the Thieu regime was "self-centered and stubborn" and that it did not represent the majority. Yet the United States, "despite the heavy costs, continues to prop up" the Saigon regime. Symington believed that North Vietnam was willing to negotiate and that the "stumbling block" was the virtual veto by South Vietnam.[78] Statements, such a Symington's and Clifford's, angered and frightened Saigon. Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky of South Vietnam responded by saying "My problem is I have to fight not only my enemies, but also my so called friends…Do you ever hear the Russians or the Chinese criticizing North Vietnam?"[79]

This came on the heels of Kissinger's article in the January issue of the quarterly *Foreign Affairs* in which he expressed his idea of a two-track system; Washington and Hanoi would negotiate a mutual military withdrawal, then Saigon and the NLF would handle the political settlement. As mentioned earlier, Kissinger also put forth the idea

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[78] Bernard Gwertzman, "Symington Joins in Scoring Saigon," NYT, January 11, 1969, p1c7.
[79] Paul Hoffman, "Ky Berates His Critics in the US as 'Irresponsible'", *NYT*, December 19, 1968; p3c5.

that the United States should cede increasing responsibility to South Vietnam. In order to do this, according to Kissinger, the United States would need to create some time in which the GVN, with American assistance, could develop "a political program to which non-Communist South Vietnamese could rally."[80]

Kissinger's plan, however, was going to be very hard to implement. According to Herbert S. Parmet, hopeless corruption and cynicism had made the typical South Vietnamese apprehensive of the war. This didn't go unnoticed in the United States Congress. Problems about continued US support had been voiced throughout 1968. Senators such as Harold Hughes of Iowa and Thomas Eagleton of Missouri insisted that Saigon end its repressive and corrupt policies in order to give ordinary South Vietnamese citizen something to hope for. They insisted that this change in policies should be a prerequisite for receiving American aid.[81]

On December 12 Nixon met with Johnson for a second transition meeting. Among other things, they discussed the bombing of Vietnam. Johnson's November bombing halt had applied to the area north of the DMZ. Since then, the number of bombs dropped on enemy-held areas in South Vietnam and Laos had increased. At the meeting, Johnson urged Nixon to continue the bombing. Nixon assured Johnson that he would stay the course and added that when peace was finally achieved, Johnson would get the credit Nixon felt he deserved.[82]

Nixon began to feel the weight of the impending task. According to his memoirs, he was not "hopeful about the prospects of settling the Vietnam War through the Paris

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[80] Kissinger, *WHY*, 234.
[81] Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1990), 568.

talks and felt that we needed to rethink our diplomatic and military policy on Vietnam."[83] Nixon's concerns that the negotiations would fall short were heightened by an abortive attempt to establish a private channel with Hanoi. According to Kissinger, on December 20 the Nixon campaign "sent a private message to the North Vietnamese stressing our readiness for serious negotiations." Hanoi's reply, which came on December 31, came in the form of demands. They demanded the "total withdrawal of *all* American forces" and the replacement of what they called the "Thieu-Ky-Houng clique."[84] Needless to say, this was not the response for which Nixon and Kissinger had hoped.

According to his memoirs, Nixon wanted to avoid the trap that Johnson fell into – that of spending all of his efforts on Vietnam – by concentrating more on long-term problems, such as restoring the "vitality" of the NATO alliance. He was also concerned with the problems that the US was facing in the Middle East, the Soviet Union, and China.[85] During the transition period, accordingly, the Nixon Administration tried to "link" progress in Vietnam, the Middle East, and Berlin to progress in areas of Soviet concern.

According to Ambrose, Nixon was counting on the "carrot" he had to offer Moscow, as well as Peking. He could offer the Soviets concessions over strategic arms limitation, increased trade, and the prospect of an easing of Cold War tensions. To this end, Kissinger contacted the Soviets in mid-December. He emphasized that there were "real and substantial differences between us and that an effort to lesson the tension created by these differences should be the central focus" of US-Soviet relations. To the

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[82] Ambrose, 241-2.
[83] Nixon, 341-3.
[84] Kissinger, 258-9.
[85] Nixon 341-3.

Chinese Nixon would offer normalization of relations. According to Ambrose, these deals seemed so reasonable to Nixon that he was sure that the war would be over within a year of his inauguration. Contrary to Nixon's expectations, however, his efforts at "linkage" would fail to produce the desired effects in Vietnam.[86]

[86] Ambrose, 225; Nixon, 346.

Options

Nixon's main goal during the period of his transition to the office of President was to decide the course he would take in Vietnam. Though Nixon gave guarantees that his administration would be able to get the United States out of the debacle that Vietnam had become, in reality he had no idea how he was going to accomplish this feat. Thus Kissinger began to review all possible policies towards Vietnam.

A few weeks after his appointment, in early December, Kissinger commissioned the RAND Corporation, a California-based think-tank, to analyze the possible range of options for victory in Vietnam. Daniel Ellsberg, who later became famous for releasing the Pentagon Papers, was put in charge of the project. Ellsberg, Henry Rowen (the president of RAND), and Kissinger met at Nixon's Pierre Hotel headquarters in order to discuss the options papers.[87]

The study did not include an unequivocal "win option". One reason for this might have been the demanding conditions that for RAND defined "victory" in Vietnam:

> The destruction or withdrawal of all NVA units in South Vietnam, the destruction, withdrawal, or dissolution of all (or most) VC forces and apparatus, the permanent cessation of infiltration, and the virtually unchallenged sovereignty of a stable, non-Communist regime…, with no significant Communist political role except on an individual , "reconciled" basis.[88]

The RAND study laid out seven more or less viable options. At one extreme was "military escalation aimed at negotiated victory;" at the other extreme was "unilateral withdrawal of all US forces." According to Fred Ikle, a member of the RAND team, the unilateral withdrawal option was eliminated right away because Kissinger said, "it was to far outside what was going to happen that it didn't help the options papers, and it would

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[87] Hersh, 48-9.

upset Nixon." As a result, the most dovish option became a "substantial reduction in US presence while seeking a compromise settlement."[89]

Ellsberg's study found a "systematic,…distinct cleavage in opinion" between two groups, labeled "group A" and "group B." Group A consisted of the highest levels of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), the State Department and the US Embassy in Saigon, and some CIA. Group A typically believed that the Thieu regime was stronger than ever and that Hanoi was in Paris to negotiate "from a sense of weakness and failure." In light of such weakness, Group A believed that American negotiators should insist on a withdrawal of all Communist forces from South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.[90]

Most in Group A wanted a large military presence to remain in South Vietnam and deemed that troop withdrawals should not happen for twelve to eighteen months. Furthermore, those in Group A typically believed that if the US escalated troop levels, then the war could be won in a couple of years. This, however, would require mobilization of the reserves and greater expenditures. It would also lead to more casualties as well as the possibility of an unfavorable reaction from the Soviets, the Chinese, or both. While Group A argued that the American public would accept theses costs, it also thought that these measures might not be necessary because "the credible threat, explicit or tacit, of unrestricted bombing or limited invasion of North Vietnam

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[88] Quoted in Kimball, 91. Due to lack of resources, Kimball was the main source in which I could find a thorough description of the RAND study. See pages 91-6.
[89] Isaacson, 162-3.
[90] Kimball, 91-6.

might well cause the DRV [North Vietnam] to accept our conditions for victory immediately."[91]

Dissidents in Group A were skeptical about the military methods employed by General Abrams, ones that involved large military operations and bombing. They advocated dividing ARVN and US forces into smaller units and deploying them into populated areas in order to carry out counterinsurgency activities. The dissidents argued that this change would allow the US to withdraw troops sooner, but it also might drag the war on for four or five years longer.[92]

According to Nixon, the polls showed that the public favored a quick and decisive military victory. In light of both this and of Group A's hopes for the war, Nixon looked at any "knockout blows" available to him. According to his memoirs, one option available to Nixon was to "bomb the elaborate system of irrigation dikes in North Vietnam." Nixon dropped this option, however, because the floods would have killed "hundreds of thousands of civilians." Another "knockout" option available to Nixon involved tactical nuclear weapons, which he turned down for fear of involving the Soviets or the Chinese.[93]

Almost as if in retaliation to Group A's suggestions, Nixon later commented that had he followed a different policy in Vietnam, it "would probably have required up to six months of highly intensified fighting and significantly increased casualties before the Communists would" accept a peace agreement. According to Nixon, this option would have caused unrest throughout the United States and it would have destroyed the chance

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[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Nixon, 347.

to develop new relations that he wanted with the USSR and the PRC. Thus he did not believe that the American public was willing to accept the costs mentioned by Group A.[94]

According to Nixon, those who favored escalation argued that an attack on North Vietnam would hold any Communist troops to the DMZ, that mining Haiphong Harbor would "cripple" Communist supplies, and that operations into Laos and Cambodia would stop the enemies "ability to make hit-and-run attacks against our forces in South Vietnam.[95] This option looked very appetizing to the hard-line, anti-Communist Nixon, but he ruled it out from fear of the "beast" of public protest.

Group B, consisting of the Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford and most of his staff, a minority of the State Department, and some CIA, believed that escalation would lead to failure militarily and generate more domestic resistance. According to Group B, counterinsurgency would fail because of the nature of guerilla war: the US had to defeat the Communists in order to win, but Hanoi had only not to lose in order to win. Thus Hanoi could hold out until the US was forced, either by public opinion or budget constraints, to withdraw its forces.[96]

Those in Group B did not think that Hanoi was in Paris out of weakness. They were of the opinion that the US should seek "a coalition government…[and] mutual withdrawal [of US and North Vietnamese forces] or ceasefire…as part of an agreed overall settlement." Group B preferred a formal agreement to an unspoken understanding, for then "there would be a clear expression, politically useful both for the GVN [Government of Vietnam, Saigon] and the United States that the main purpose of the U.S. involvement had been accomplished – hence US withdrawal was appropriate."

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[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

This "honorable exit" scenario, in which compromise was not victory, but also was not defeat, would have assuaged Nixon's concerns over maintaining credibility with our allies.[97]

Group B favored Kissinger's "decent interval solution." It suggested Vietminization with simultaneous withdrawal of troops while seeking compromise in Paris. Like Kissinger, Group B sought to compromise only on the military issues, leaving the hard task of a political settlement to be negotiated by the Thieu regime and the NLF once the US had withdrawn. The Saigon regime might survive "like South Korea, with an acceptable level of US support." Furthermore, Group B was willing to accept the eventual defeat of Thieu's regime by the NLF in legitimate elections. "The United States could accept such a Communist take-over in SVN, since it would have resulted from a primarily indigenous conflict. The principle US objective of repelling external aggression would have been met," and thus US credibility would have been maintained.[98]

The RAND team also noted a third option, "C", which called for "unilateral withdrawal of all US forces within one to two years," regardless of any progress made in Paris, or any other developments. Ellsberg told Kissinger that Group C's goal had "no advocates within the US government, but might become necessary if some of the other alternatives failed."[99]

Nixon later commented that he had understood those who urged a "quick and orderly withdrawal of all American forces." One of his friends in Congress had even

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[96] Kimball 91-6.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

urged him to "put the blame on Kennedy and Johnson and…announce that you're bringing them all home, and you'll be a hero." Nixon, however, felt that "we simply could not sacrifice an ally in such a way." He added that "if we suddenly reneged on our earlier pledges of support, because they had become difficult or costly to carry out, or because they had become unpopular at home, we would not be worthy of the trust of other nations and we certainly would not receive it."[100] What Nixon did not understand, or what he was unwilling to admit, was that many of our allies considered the time and effort that we had already put into Vietnam to be sufficient, and that we had done what we said we would do and more.

According to the RAND study, there were both optimistic supporters and skeptics of the Vietnam conflict within the government of the United States. The optimists believed that ARVN was fighting better than ever, that pacification, as mentioned earlier, had made real progress, and that US operations had been effective – and with fewer restraints could be yet more so. They took solace in the fact that the Thieu regime was growing increasingly stable with the introduction of civilians such as Prime Minister Houng. The pessimists within the US government felt that despite this progress, the war was at a stalemate, and that without escalation of the war, which was not possible due to public opinion, the allies would not be able to "bring the enemy to his knees" within the next few years.[101]

Senator George S. McGovern (D.-South Dakota) offered another rejected option. He proposed an end to all US offensive missions in Vietnam. According to McGovern, this would spare thousands of American lives as most American troops were killed on

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[100] Nixon 348.
[101] Kimball 91-6.

search and destroy missions. Instead he wanted a consolidation of US forces in "easily defended enclaves."[102] This would allow the US to start sending troops home, because not so many would be needed. The remaining troops could consist of volunteers, and with Vietnamization, could eventually turn into "adviser" status.

According to Isaacson, there were no suggestions made at the meeting between Kissinger and Ellsberg which incorporated the extremes of the study – military escalation as well as troop withdrawals – because they "would surely have though it absurd."[103] Yet this would eventually become the policy of the United States, partly owing to Nixon's so called "mad man" theory. In any case, most in the US government believed that the Saigon government needed to eliminate corruption and broaden its political appeal, and that ARVN also needed to improve its effectiveness before a *complete* US withdrawal could be accomplished.[104]

Kissinger then asked Ellsberg to expand his line of questioning and to ask each agency the questions separately so that Kissinger would later be able to compare the set of answers – later known as National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM1).[105] On December 29, 1968, the *New York Times* reported that Nixon had ordered his key advisers to present him with "realistic" options on Vietnam by January 20 so that he could devise a "coherent" strategy on Vietnam. The article commented that shortly thereafter – "presumably in February" – Nixon would select the course or courses that he would take on Vietnam.[106]

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[102] Ben A. Franklin, "Churchmen Open Drive to End War," *NYT*, February 4, 1969, p24c4.
[103] Isaacson, 163.
[104] Kimball, 95.
[105] Hersh, 50.
[106] Robert Semple, Jr., "Nixon Meets His Top Aides and Orders Vietnam Study," *NYT* , December 12, 1968, p1c6.

The Rand report laid out the options that were available to Nixon when he just prior to becoming president in 1969. Ellsberg's report was significant because it showed that there was a deep cleavage in opinion within the different agencies of the United States government. Furthermore, the course that Nixon eventually took was not an option mentioned in the paper – escalation of the war combined with troop withdrawals – a step he undoubtedly intended to be a part of his so called "mad-man theory."

Honeymoon – the first months

By 1969, Vietnam, both North and South, had been completely devastated by the war. Over four million peasants had been driven from their homes. The Vietnamese people were very weary of the war, and the Thieu regime was largely unpopular amongst the rural population, despite the major gains it made in 1968.[107] Similarly, the American public was very weary of the war; nearly three hundred American soldiers had been killed each week in the two and a half months between the election and Nixon's inauguration.[108]

According to Kissinger, the government of South Vietnam seemed more stable politically than it had in the previous four years. Yet a communist infrastructure still existed in "80 percent of the hamlets." Furthermore, "sixty-five percent of the total population and 81 percent of the rural population," according to Kissinger, were under communist influence. "In other words," Kissinger commented, "the situation in the countryside had not changed significantly since…October 1966."[109] It seems clear then, that after years of struggle, the majority of people chose to be communist. Notwithstanding the United States' best efforts to the contrary.

The war in Vietnam, in which, according to Isaacson, "victory was not feasible,"[110] was not the only problem that Nixon inherited. The expansion of the Arab-Israeli conflict was a major point of concern because it seemed to Nixon's transition team that it was entirely possible that the Soviets would enter the conflict on the side of the

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[107] Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 274.
[108] Ambrose, 241.
[109] Kissinger, 236.
[110] Isaacson, 158.

Arabs, a move that could have led to World War III.[111] Nixon would later comment that "the situation in the Middle East is more dangerous [than Vietnam]…because it involves…a collision of the superpowers!" While oil was obviously very important in the conflict, Nixon also cited the fact that the Middle East is the "gateway" to Africa and the Mediterranean, adding, "it's the hinge of NATO."[112]

The escalating arms race was also a persistent problem, especially in light of the situation in Berlin. The West Germans intended to hold their Presidential election in West Berlin on March 5, 1969. The Communists were strongly opposed to this and Nixon's transition team felt that the situation could become very "hot." The Soviets had reached near parity with the United States in the arms race, and this made many very nervous. In the summer of 1968, the Soviets had brutally repressed riots in Czechoslovakia, alarming many European neighbors, and they were currently putting pressure on Rumania and Yugoslavia. The transition team was worried that any further unrest could lead to instability in the region.[113]

Nixon also had domestic problems, the most prominent of which was the economy. Nixon inherited an economy in which the inflation rate was the highest it had been since the Korean War, and interest rates were at their highest level since the Civil War. Thus one of Nixon's top priorities was to cut the inflation rate. There were many ways for him to do this, but, according to Ambrose, the "quickest and most effective" way would be to end the war in Vietnam."[114] Daniel P. Moynihan, one of Nixon's

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[111] Memo: "Potential Foreign Policy Problems for the US over the Next Few Months;" NSCF; HAKOF; box 4; World Situation; RMNM; NACP.
[112] "A Conversation with a President," *DOS Publications* (Washington D.C.: US Government PrintingOffice, July 1970), 32.
[113] Memo: "Potential Foreign Policy Problems for the US over the Next Few Months;" NSCF; HAKOF; box 4; World Situation; RMNM; NACP.
[114] Ambrose, 225-6.

advisers, expressed his concern to Nixon that the one thing the President should seek to avoid "at whatever immediate costs" was a controversy over the "war on poverty."[115] Therefore, if Nixon pulled out of Vietnam (the sooner the better) when he became President, then he would have killed two birds with one stone: appeasing the anti-war movement while simultaneously helping the economy.

On January 20, 1968 Nixon gave his inaugural speech in Washington D.C. He made numerous references to the situation in Vietnam. He said: "the greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker," adding, "this honor now beckons America." He then alluded to the country's economic woes: "we shall plan now for the day when our wealth can be transferred from the destruction of war abroad [in Vietnam] to the urgent needs of our people at home."[116]

Nixon indicated that he intended to stand firm in Vietnam: "we seek an open world…in which no people…will live in angry isolation…to those who are *willing to join*, let us cooperate." He then added, "to all those who would be tempted by weakness [and thus not *willing to join*], let us leave no doubt that we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be." The President then indicated his willingness to compromise when he said, "the Peace we seek…is not victory over any other people, but the Peace that comes…with understanding for those who have opposed us, with the opportunity for all the peoples of this earth to *choose* their own destiny."[117] This last statement about choice was among the key rationales for America's struggle in Vietnam

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[115] Telegram from Daniel P. Moynihan to Nixon, February 20, 1969; White House Special Files (henceforth WHSF); Staff Members and Office Files (henceforth SMOF); President's Office Files (henceforth POF); box 1; President's Handwriting; 2/69; RMNM; NACP.
[116] Nixon, *Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1969), 2, 4.
[117] Ibid, 6-7. Italics added by author.

– giving South Vietnam the opportunity to choose its destiny free of Communist influence.

Nixon was shocked when he learned that there were protesters on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was the first time in the history of the American presidency that the inaugural parade met with protesters. They chanted "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the N.L.F. is going to win" or "four more years of death." Some protesters went further, spitting on the police and burning the small American flags that the Boy Scouts handed out. [118] This was a clear demonstration that many in America were unhappy with the situation.

As Nixon took over, new Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird felt that Vietnamization (giving the South Vietnamese more war responsibilities), an idea started by McNamara and widely seen as a possible way out of Vietnam, would boost American morale.[119] National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 1, the expanded version of the RAND options paper, dealt with the options in Vietnam, such as Vietnamization, and was commissioned by Kissinger the day after the inauguration. Kissinger and the NSC released numerous other NSSMs, with questions ranging from Vietnam to foreign aid. According to Hersh, these NSSMs had three goals. First, they were a genuine effort to get the bureaucracy thinking about different options in foreign policy. Second they sought to establish the power of Kissinger's NSC over the other agencies of the government. Finally, the NSSMs were intended to overwhelm the "faceless civil servants," allowing Nixon and Kissinger to make decisions on their own. In reality, as will be seen later, many important decisions were made without the use of the NSSMs.[120]

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[118] Ambrose, 245.
[119] Schulzinger, 277.

While Nixon was preparing to move into the White House, Johnson was desperately trying to reach any agreement with the North Vietnamese. The problem was that South Vietnam had not yet joined the talks. Part of the problem was the procedural issue concerning the shape of the negotiating table. According to the *New York Times*, the United States had submitted no fewer than six table patterns, yet they were still unable to reach an agreement.[121] On January 7, 1968, Johnson told Rusk: "I'm fed up with the South Vietnamese." He wanted to force the issue, as Clark Clifford had been urging him to do. Johnson then told Rusk to inform President Thieu that they were ready to negotiate without him.[122]

Around this time, both parties in Paris accepted the Soviet suggestion of a round table with nearby rectangular tables. According to Kissinger, Rusk then told Saigon that Nixon "urged" it to accept the compromise *before* his inauguration, which seems to run contrary to Nixon's intentions during the Anna Chennault affair.[123] Saigon agreed and the talks were scheduled to begin on January 18, two days before Johnson's term expired. The South Vietnamese, however, stalled, possibly at the suggestion of Nixon, and the talks did not start until January 25, effectively stripping Johnson of any last minute chances at redemption.[124] Thus, by sticking with Thieu and not holding unilateral negotiations with North Vietnam, as he threatened, Johnson let the chance of peace slip through his fingers.

Henry Cabot Lodge, Nixon's chief negotiator in Paris, tried to set up talks between himself and his counterparts in Hanoi. Le Duc Tho, North Vietnam's head

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[120] Hersh, 35.
[121] Paul Hofmann, "US Offers Plans to End Deadlock in Vietnam Talks," *NYT*, January 3, 1969, p1c3.
[122] Langguth, 530.
[123] Kissinger, WHY, 52.

negotiator, suggested that "goodwill" and continued private meetings between the US and North Vietnam would make the talks more productive.[125] According to Kissinger, Nixon was eager to negotiate an "honorable extrication," which Nixon defined as anything except handing over the South Vietnamese people, who had relied on the United States, to the Communists.[126]

At the first plenary meeting of the broadened peace talks in Paris, on January 25, Lodge proposed a restoration of the DMZ, a guaranteed mutual withdrawal of all foreign forces from South Vietnam, and an exchange of prisoners in order to hasten the talks in Paris. The American negotiators criticized North Vietnamese attacks on South Vietnam and said that they would not talk with the NLF since the United States did not recognize them as an official party to the negotiations. The US then insisted on the two-track formula of negotiations, in which the US and Hanoi would only negotiate a military treaty, leaving political matters to be worked out by the NLF and Saigon.[127] Despite Saigon's disagreement, it was generally accepted in Washington that at some point Saigon would have to discuss internal matters with the NLF. There were even proposals for NLF participation as a political party in the next elections.[128]

The Communists then presented their four-point program in rebuttal of Nixon's ideas. They indicated that they considered neither the Vietcong nor the North Vietnamese to be foreign interveners – only the United States was. The Communists accordingly demanded a unilateral withdrawal of all US troops, independence for the whole of Vietnam, inclusion of the NLF in the talks, and the exclusion of the "Thieu-Ky-

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[124] Langguth, 530.
[125] Kimball, 106.
[126] Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 675.
[127] Kimball, 108-9.

Houng regime" from power.[129] Hanoi added that Nixon's proposals had attempted to "mask the aggressive designs of the United States" in Vietnam.[130] Nixon later wrote that anything in Vietnam was negotiable, except the return of all POWs and anything that led to the overthrow of Thieu.[131]

Nixon was correct in believing that unless the United States backed up its diplomatic efforts in Paris with strong military pressure, the Communists would have continued their strategy of "talking and fighting" until the American public tired of the war and the Americans were forced to cave in.[132] Kissinger wrote in his memoirs that Nixon feared that the negotiations would be worthless unless the military situation was changed. Nixon, according to Kissinger, believed that Hanoi would accept a negotiated settlement only if it had no other choice. In other words, Nixon favored a policy of "maximum pressure."[133] Nixon's plans involved South Vietnam's army, known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN).

According to Secretary of Defense Laird, the Defense Appropriations Committee had allowed a "tremendous increase" in funds available for ARVN over the past few years, adding that they were "much better off this year than they were last year."[134] At the end of the year, Thieu announced, at what turned out to be a State of the Nation address, that the rapidly expanding South Vietnamese army would "gradually assume more and more of the burden." Showing his awareness of US public opinion, Thieu then

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[128] Telegram from Saigon to Rogers, January 27, 1969, p2; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2728; POL 27-14 VIET 1/21/69; GRDS; NACP.
[129] Kimball, 108-9.
[130] Paul Hofmann, "Vietcong Reject Nixon Proposals," *NYT*, January 29, 1969, p1c1.
[131] Nixon, 347.
[132] Kimball, 111.
[133] Kissinger, *WHY*, 261.
[134] Transcripts of CBS "Face the Nation," February 29, 1969, with Secretary of Defense M. Laird; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2728; POL 27-14 VIET 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.

added that this was South Vietnam's "moral responsibility" toward her allies. He ended by saying "our armed forces are coming to maturity. Nineteen sixty-nine should be the year of peace."[135]

The *New York Times* and the *Chicago Daily News* reported that Thieu was expecting a withdrawal of anywhere between 20,000-200,000 American troops once Nixon took office.[136] On January 15, however, Thieu indicated his concern over these rumors. He said that he considered a withdrawal of 200,000 troops as an "abandonment" by the United States. He also expressed his concern with the effect that such news would have on the South Vietnamese public, as well as ARVN.[137]

The talk of troop withdrawals, combined with the broadened talks and the new American administration, gave high hopes that the war would be over soon despite Thieu's apparent concern. On January 27, Senator Fulbright, a persistent critic of Vietnam, was optimistic about the talks, but he cautioned against a premature withdrawal of troops. The Senator said: "I think we should give these people [in Paris] an opportunity to negotiate without making any serious change in the status quo."[138]

Despite high hopes, the talks again slowed to a snail's pace. Neither side was willing to forfeit its demands in order to reach a compromise. In response to the Communist demands for removal of the Thieu regime as a basis for hastening an agreement, the Americans had to "restate and clarify" elements of US policy "misunderstood" by North Vietnam. At the fourth plenary session of the Paris meetings, on February 13, Lodge indicated that the US recognized the Thieu regime as the "legal

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[135] "Thieu Sees a Way to cut U.S. Force in the Coming Year," editorial, *NYT*, January 1, 1969, p4c4.
[136] "Thieu Said to Weigh Proposing Cutback of up to 60,000 G.I.'s," editorial, *NYT*, January 12, 1969, p3c3. Reference to the *Chicago Daily News* was made in this article.

and legitimate" government of South Vietnam. He indicated that steps would not be taken without its approval. Lodge added that Hanoi could not expect to "nullify the reality of the legal, constitutional, and factual existence" of the Thieu government.[139] Thus the Nixon administration received a lesson on the North Vietnamese negotiating approach.

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In early February, Soviet Ambassador Anatolii Dobrynin visited the White House for his first official visit. Nixon and Kissinger decided to use the opportunity to open a private diplomatic channel with the Soviets. Within a short time, Kissinger and Dobrynin were meeting weekly for lunch. According to Nixon's memoirs, he brought up the idea of "linkage" when Dobrynin indicated that the Soviets desired talks on arms limitations. Nixon thus indicated his feeling that progress in one area must logically be linked to progress in other areas:

> History makes it clear that wars result not so much from arms, or even from arms races, as they do from underlying political differences and political problems. So I think it is incumbent on us, when we begin strategic arms talks, to do what we can in a parallel way to defuse critical political situations like the Middle East and Vietnam and Berlin, where there is a danger that arms might be put to use.[140]

Before the Ambassador left he handed Nixon a letter from Moscow indicating that the Soviets were prepared to take action on the same issues.[141]

Some felt that the Administration needed to take advantage of the Soviet interest in arms talks and not risk losing the opportunity by demanding that the Soviets produce

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[137] Telegram from Saigon to Rogers, January 15, 1969; NSCF; box 186; State Cables vol 1; Paris Meetings/NODIS,Paris Meetings/NODIS/PLUS, Jan-Feb 69; RMNM; NACP.
[138] Mann, 627.
[139] Letter from US Embassy Paris (henceforth Paris) to Rogers, February 13, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 67-9; box 2728, POL 27-14 VIET 2/13/69; GRDS; NACP.
[140] Nixon, 369-70.

concessions in other areas. Kissinger, however, told Nixon the next day that "we should seek to utilize this Soviet interest, stemming as I think it does from anxiety [about what steps the new Administration was planning to take], to induce them to come to grips with the real source of tension…in Vietnam."[142] The Soviets, however, were not ready for "linkage." Two days after the meeting with Nixon, Dobrynin told Harriman that the Soviet leaders had debated for over a year about arms control. Now they were finally willing to negotiate. It was not now possible, Dobrynin said, "to tie political settlements with nuclear questions." He indicated that Moscow "would not be bribed or intimidated…and nothing would induce them to give in on some political issue in order to get our agreement on nuclear matters."[143] Nixon's hope that he could get concessions in Vietnam by linking it to arms control proved to have little basis.

According to Kissinger's memoirs, Nixon asked him in early March to inform Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin that Secretary of State Rogers had gone too far during their conversation about Vietnam on 8 March, in which Rogers indicated that the United States was willing to participate in private talks with North Vietnam.[144] Other evidence, however, indicates that it was Kissinger, not Nixon, who was worried about Rogers' comments and that Kissinger desperately wanted to bring the issue to the President's attention, in what may have been a power play – as Nixon vied with Rogers for influence over Nixon.

In a memo to Nixon dated 10 March, Kissinger described the policy the administration had taken since 20 January: "We have combined heavy military pressure

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[141] Ibid.
[142] Kissinger, *WHY*, 143-4.
[143] Kimball, 116.
[144] Kissinger, *WHY*, 29.

with a deliberate pace in Paris," Kissinger felt that the United States had to refrain from taking the initiative in opening private talks with Hanoi because to do so would have serious consequences on the Paris talks and on the United States' relationship with South Vietnam. He added that "the policy was designed to avoid an impression of undo anxiety which might tempt Hanoi to draw out the negotiations in the belief that we could be outlasted and would later make concessions because of domestic political pressure." Kissinger went on to urge Nixon *not* to repeat the offer made by Rogers to engage in four-power private talks on political and military matters.[145]

According to Haldeman's diaries, the situation had upset Kissinger for a few days. Haldeman makes it seem that Kissinger was afraid that the United States had lost its opportunity to "win" the conflict in Vietnam. Kissinger, according to Haldeman, claimed that the United States had "a great chance to take a hard line and Rogers gave it away."[146] Could victory have been the secret plan that the Administration had promised during the elections?

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The first major event of the Nixon presidency was his trip to Europe, which was announced on 30 January and planned for late February. Some officials felt that Nixon should not go to Europe so early in his term. During his campaign, however, Nixon had said that he wanted to focus more on Europe, which had been practically ignored during the Johnson Administration. According to Haldeman's diaries, Nixon said he "must go

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[145] Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, March 10, 1968; NSCF; box 175; Dobrynin/Rogers Conv. On the Paris Negotiations, Mar.69; RMNM; NACP.
[146] Haldeman, 47.

[to Europe] before Vietnam problems set in and [the] Paris talks bog down," a remark that suggests Nixon's lack of faith in the Paris negotiations.[147]

Schulzinger feels that the President went to Europe early in his term to divert the public's attention in order to continue the war with less public pressure.[148] According to a White House memo from Haldeman, it appears that Nixon was indeed trying to keep the public's attention off of the war. He wrote to Herb Klein, the Director of Communications, that Nixon wanted the Administration to appear busy while he was in Europe. He wanted the various agencies to issue several releases each day on Domestic matters. [149]

It appears that Nixon was taking the initiative and setting the priorities for the United States. While Vietnam was a short-term problem, Nixon realized that the Cold War was at the heart of the long-term problem, and he was trying to shift the focus of the United States. According to Kissinger, "allied cohesion would depend on the ability to make sure that the American and European perceptions of vital interests were congruent, and perceived to be so by the Soviet Union."[150] However, NIxon was too obsessed about public opinion to openly state that Vietnam was no longer the stage for the Cold War, and was thus not a vital interest for the United States. The shift in focus that he did indicate frightened the South Vietnamese. According to a Department of State telegram, Saigon was nervous that Nixon's trip indicated he intended to give "priority" to Europe over Asia.[151] Nixon left for Europe on 23 February still unsure about his policy in Vietnam.

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[147] Ibid, 30.
[148] Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, 275-6.
[149] Memo from Haldeman to Herb Klein, February 17, 1969; WHSF; SMOF; POF; box 1; President's Handwriting; 2/69; RMNM; NACP.
[150] Kissinger, *WHY*, 85.
[151] Telegram from Saigon to Paris, February 10, 1969; NSCF; box 186; State Cables vol 1; Paris Meetings/NODIS; Paris Meetings/NODIS/PLUS, 1-2/69; RMNM; NACP.

America's European Allies and Their Hopes for the New Administration

During his campaign, Nixon asserted he would place "top priority" on Europe.[152] Nixon feared that withdrawal from Vietnam would damage American credibility in Europe. More than a year after his inauguration, he claimed that European leaders "all know how much rides on the United States coming out of Vietnam with a victory."[153] Kissinger wrote in his memoirs that "Vietnam confronted European governments with a dilemma: they felt the need to respond to domestic pressures [stemming from discontent over American involvement in the war], but for their own security they feared an American humiliation or defeat and shrank from any step that would contribute to it."[154]

Europe's concern over American involvement in Vietnam was based on the fear of Communist takeover in South East Asia, and eventually in Europe – a standard Cold War assumption known as the "domino theory." It seems clear, however, that many Europeans were more worried about America's commitments in Europe than its commitments in Vietnam because of Soviet actions in the area. In November 1968, the Warsaw Pact's armed forces intervened during popular unrest in Czechoslovakia. That same month, NATO's ministers met and, due to fear of Soviet intentions, reassessed the strength and capability of NATO's forces, which were composed primarily of American GI's and equipment.[155] Throughout this same period, the Soviets were spreading their influence in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the United States Congress had been

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[152] Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Nixon Says He has Eased Views on Communist Bloc since 1960," *NYT*, August 7, 1968, p1c6.
[153] "A Conversation with a President," *DOS Publications*, Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, July 1970, 30.
[154] Kissinger, *WHY*, 81.
[155] Telegram from US Mission NATO to Rogers, January 16, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 1581; DEF 1 NATO 1/1/69; GRDS; NACP.

pressuring for a reduction of US forces in Europe since early 1968 because the United States was "over committed" due to the war in Vietnam.[156] Thus Europeans had a valid fear that the United States would turn its focus towards South East Asia, leaving them to fend for themselves.

It seems quite clear, then, that America's NATO allies, and others in Europe, would have preferred United States troops to remain in Europe to maintain the Cold War balance of power, despite their concerns about the outcome in Vietnam. European leaders tried their best to placate Congress by lessening America's financial burden in the defense of the area, and thus to placate Congress. However, most European nations still had not recovered fully from WWII, which may be one reason why Vietnam was an American war, rather than a war conducted by NATO's generals. In addition, some European officials felt that the United States was creating problems for them by staying in Vietnam. A report from the Western European Union argued that "US involvement in Vietnam weakens Western moral position in ways prejudicial to Western European interests."[157]

France was no longer in NATO, but Nixon hoped to reestablish good ties with General Charles de Gaulle and to retain France as a strong ally. France was particularly skeptical of American involvement in Vietnam. According to Raymond Barre, the Vice President of the Commission of the European Communities, "many people in France [not just De Gaulle] favor a quick and drastic solution to the Vietnam problem."[158] In a conversation with Assistant Secretary Hillenbrand on 28 February 1968, De Gaulle

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[156] Memorandum from Robert E. Osgood to Kissinger, March 26, 1969; NSCF; Parallel Files: FRUS; box 1; DOS – 3/26/69 closed 31 May 69, vol II; RMNM; NACP.
[157] Telegram from US Mission NATO to Rogers, October 11, 1968; RG 59 CFPF 1967-69; box 1537; DEF 1 EUR 6/1/68; GRDS; NACP.

indicated that France's disengagement from Algeria, while painful, had been "a sad necessity." He said that at times it had been necessary for him to act with "hardness and decisiveness" even against his own military. He added that he hoped that Nixon would not hesitate to do the same in Vietnam.[159]

In his conversation with General De Gaulle on 2 March 1969, Nixon, who respected De Gaulle, sat and listened to his recommendations. De Gaulle felt that the US should conduct political negotiations at the same time as military negotiations, a stance that Nixon, who advocated Kissinger's two track plan, was shrewdly not willing to take. As far as the political settlement was concerned, De Gaulle indicated that the 1954 Geneva agreements were still in effect. He argued very convincingly that since everybody, even China, had accepted the agreement, then it would be an acceptable means to a solution in Vietnam.[160]

De Gaulle then warned Nixon that the United States should not withdraw with undue haste, but should indicate publicly that it would withdraw after the '54 accords were applied. He did not believe that the South Vietnamese government would "initially...be dominated by Ho Chi Minh," indicating that elections would probably result in some kind of coalition government. The general's explanation that Communist domination was possible and that it might happen in the next few years, but that he felt that "this would then be their [South Vietnam's] responsibility and not that of the US." De Gaulle's logic was sound.[161]

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[158] *FRUS 1964-68, vXIII Western Europe Region* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1995), 703.
[159] Memo of Conversation between De Gaulle and Assistant Secretary Hillenbrand, February 28, 1968; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2817; POL 27 VIET S 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.
[160] Memo of Conversation between Nixon and De Gaulle, March 2, 1968; NSCF; Parallel Files: FRUS; box 1; Mem Cons – the President/General De Gaulle, 2/28-3/2/69; RMNM; NACP.
[161] Ibid.

De Gaulle then came to the core of his argument. He pointed out that if the Vietnam "problem" was settled then the United States would have its hands free to deal with the Soviets and try to normalize relations with them. He added: "So long as Viet Nam continued this could not be done."[162] De Gaulle's argument is very convincing. Furthermore, the Vietnam problem was a major concern of America's NATO allies.

De Gaulle told Nixon that Germany's leaders feared that a reduction of United States forces in Germany would be devastating to German morale.[163] The Germans had expressed this same sentiment to American officials. In May 1968, Dr. Kurt Birrenbach, a member of the German Bundestag, told Under Secretary of State Eugene Rostow that he realized that the United States was beset with a large war in Vietnam and that he thus expected the United States to conclude that it had to limit its commitments. If so, he "hoped that the United States would give Europe first consideration in its scale of priorities."[164] In November 1968, German State Secretary Von Hase told Senator Stennis that he understood America's commitment to Vietnam and its implications for Europe, still there was a feeling that "the US commitment to Europe suffers because of US over commitment to Asia." He added, though, that the United States needed to continue to have a military presence Asia, indicating a "Korea-like phasing down of military action."[165]

The British had their own view of the situation, but they were also unhappy with American involvement in Vietnam. In April 1968, the *London Times* called the Vietnam

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[162] Ibid.
[163] Memo of Conversation between Nixon and De Gaulle, March 1, 1968; NCSF; Parallel Files: FRUS; box 1; Mem Cons – the President/General De Gaulle, 2/28-3/2/69; RMNM; NACP.
[164] FRUS, 694.
[165] Telegram from Bonn to Rogers, November 6, 1968; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2815; POL 27 VIET S 11/1/68; GRDS; NACP.

War a "disgrace to the world."[166] In November 1968, James Reston of the *New York Times* wrote: "it would be hard to overestimate the damage done to American prestige in this part of the world [England] as a result of the Vietnam war, and what hope exists here in the election of Mr. Nixon rests in the expectation that he will now use the influence of a new administration to bring that war to an end."[167] According to the American Embassy in London, however, the British, by the time of Nixon's trip, were generally "pleased at the way things are going and happy that Vietnam has calmed down as a divisive and politically difficult domestic issue in Britain."[168] Although England was in a different position from most of America' other European allies, in view of both her special relation with the United States and her distance from the Soviet Union, many expressed concerns similar to those of France and Germany.

As Nixon left Europe, he had an idea of what America's allies there wanted the United States to do In Vietnam. Above all, they expressed a desire that the United States become recommitted to Europe in the face of Russian moves in Czechoslovakia and the Middle East. Instead of withdrawing troops from NATO to meet Congress' budget complaints, Nixon needed to begin withdrawing troops from Vietnam.

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[166]Quoted by Dana Adams Schmidt, "Europeans Hail Offers of Talks," *NYT*, April 4, 1968, p17c5.
[167] James Reston, "London: Two Cheers for Nixrey," *NYT*, November 10, 1968, sec IV p12c4.
[168] Telegram from London to Rogers, February 14, 1969, p3; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2634; POL 7 US/Nixon 1/1/69; GRDS; NACP.

The Spring Offensive and Cambodia

In late January 1969, the VC had declared a weeklong truce for the Tet, the Lunar New Year (February 15-22). Despite this self imposed truce, the enemy continued to attack United States marines bases and to shell South Vietnamese cities. The Nixon Administration correctly suspected that the enemy was preparing an offensive.[169] On the last day of the truce, February 22, the Communists launched a country wide offensive.

A few days before the offensive began, Kissinger received the answers to NSSM 1, the extended RAND study that he had ordered on January 21. According to Kissinger, the Administration was unable to "resolve our internal debate" over NSSM 1 due to the enemy attack.[170] Kimball, however, feels that NSSM 1 was not the key to policy that Kissinger indicates. He feels that the Administration moved with only "deliberate speed" for the first couple of months, "waiting for the rest of their end-the-war strategy to take effect."[171]

The responses to the questions posed in NSSM 1 show agreement on some issues, but they also show major differences of opinion within the United States government over the situation in Vietnam. The implications of the replies were far reaching because even the most optimistic assessment was that the United States would need to remain in Vietnam for another 8.3 years in order to pacify the population. There was general agreement on a wide range of issues:

> (1)The GVN (Government of Vietnam – South) and allied position in Vietnam has been strengthened recently in many respects.

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[169] "Enemy Continues Vietnam Attacks," editorial, *NYT*, February 19, 1969, p10c1.
[170] Kissinger, *WHY*, 239.
[171] Kimball, 106.

(2)The GVN has improved its political position, but it is not certain that the GVN and other non-Communist groups will be able to survive a peaceful competition with the NLF for political power in South Vietnam.

(3)The RVNAF(Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces) alone cannot now, or in the foreseeable future, stand up to the current North Vietnamese-Vietcong forces.

(4)The enemy have suffered some reverses, but they have not changed their essential objectives. We are not attriting (sic) his forces faster than he can recruit or infiltrate.

(5)The enemy is not in Paris primarily out of weakness.[172]

There was also consensus that ARVN faced several "motivation, leadership, and desertion problems;" that the pacification program (designed to align the South Vietnamese rural population with the Thieu regime) had shown little or no progress; ant that there had been a noticeable shift by "many noncommunists towards acceptance of the NFL (sic) in some capacity as part of an eventual political settlement." Yet despite this, all rejected the view that "an unfavorable settlement in Vietnam will inevitably be followed by Communist takeovers outside Indo China" – the domino theory.[173]

Two groups within the government, which had fairly consistent views, reflected the disagreements within the report. Group A was usually very optimistic about "current and future prospects in Vietnam." It usually included the Military Assistant Command Vietnam (MACV, United States Headquarters), the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the United States Embassy in Saigon. Group B, which was "decidedly more skeptical about the present and pessimistic about the future," included the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the CIA, and "to a lesser extent" the State Department.[174]

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[172] For the text of the draft summary of the responses to NSSM 1, see: *NYT*, April 25, 1972, p18c1-p19c8; for more see: Kimball, 94-7; Isaacson, 162-5.
[173] Ibid.

The Administration, according to Kissinger, could "hardly have formed its policy" because of the timing of the Communist offensive. He added that "whether by accident or design," the offensive began the day before Nixon left for Europe, on February 23, 1969, and thus it paralyzed United States response and humiliated Nixon.[175] Nixon wrote in his memoirs that his immediate response was to retaliate. While Nixon had campaigned for a diplomatic solution, privately he wanted a victory. He did not want to let the Communists manipulate him, a mistake he felt Johnson had made, because he feared this would take away his opportunity to negotiate from a position of strength.[176]

According to Kissinger, Nixon, while en route to Europe, "suddenly" ordered the bombing of North Vietnamese sanctuaries across the border in Cambodia. Kissinger claims that he asked the President to postpone the final "execute" order for forty-eight hours in order to give Kissinger time to go over the military possibilities and work out a diplomatic plan.[177] Nixon, however, indicates in his memoirs that it was Kissinger who jumped the gun. In response to worries about public reaction to bombing Cambodia, Kissinger purportedly argued "What do we care if the *New York Times* clobbers us now if it helps us end the war sooner?" Nixon said he agreed, but decided to postpone the final decision on bombing until he returned from Europe.[178] In either case, the decision was held off.

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Nixon had been interested in Cambodia since before he took office. On January 8 he told Kissinger that he wanted a report on Hanoi's situation and what, if anything, the

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[174] Ibid.
[175] Kissinger, *WHY*, 243.
[176] Nixon, 380.
[177] Kissinger, *WHY*, 243.

United States was doing to oppose it. Nixon added; "I think a very definite change of policy toward Cambodia probably should be one of the first orders of business."[179] According to Kissinger, the issue came up again in late January, when General Earl "Bus" Wheeler proposed that the United States bomb North Vietnamese bases in Cambodia as an alternative to a renewed bombing of the North, which Laird felt would not receive widespread support.[180]

The importance of Sihanoukville, a North Vietnamese base in Cambodia that General Creighton Abrams had proposed be the target of Wheeler's request, was a contested issue in NSSM 1. In Early February, Bunker backed Abrams request to bomb the Communists Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), which was known to be located in Cambodia. He added that if Prince Sihanouk complained:

> "our rejoinder must be that COSVN is located on his territory and has been for years. He has done nothing about it although his forces in the area are fully aware of COSVNs presence. Preparations are being made in South Viet-Nam and Saigon and we cannot permit the attacks to be planned and mounted from Cambodia (an indication that the Administration expected the enemies February offensive); and finally that virtually no Cambodians live in [the] immediate area."[181]

According to Kissinger, Nixon took Bunker's advice, and thus Kissinger advised Nixon on February 18 against an "unprovoked" bombing of the sanctuaries. Kissinger was worried about the issue of public support and urged that negotiations be given a chance. Nixon decided to follow Kissinger's advice. Ironically, the Communists began their offensive later that afternoon.

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[178] Nixon, 380.
[179] Isaacson, 178.
[180] Kissinger, *WHY*, 241.

In reaction to the attacks mounted on February 22, Abrams felt the time was ripe to return to the issue of Cambodia. He requested "a 96-hour retaliatory air and naval strike against the North between the DMZ and the 19th parallel," Bunker concurred with Abrams' request. He believed that the Communists were "probing" to see whether or not the United States was going to retaliate. Failure to retaliate, according to Bunker, would have emboldened the North "to continue these attacks." He added that the offensive was a clear violation of the November 1 understanding with Hanoi;"[182] a violation that could have rendered the Paris talks null and void and prompted continuation of the bombing of North Vietnam.

On February 24, there was a secret meeting on Air Force One at Brussels airport concerning Nixon's decision to bomb COSVN. Kissinger met with his military assistant, Colonel Alexander Haig; Haldeman, who was there because Nixon's presence would have attracted too much attention; and Air Force Colonel Ray B. Sitton, a "Pentagon planning officer." They decided that the bombing would be limited to within five miles of the border and that the United States would not announce the attacks, but would acknowledge them if Cambodia protested, and then offer to pay compensation for any damage to civilians.[183]

According to Hersh, Sitton was the key to maintain secrecy in the bombing of Cambodia. Sitton says that he was under no illusion why he had been brought aboard for the meeting that day: he was the "operations guy" who knew how to make Nixon's plan work. If the bombing did not remain a secret, then anti-war protesters would plague the

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[181] Telegram from Saigon to Rogers, Februaruy 13, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2728; POL 27-14 VIET 2/13/69; GRDS; NACP.
[182] Telegram from US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to Rogers, 2/23/69; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2817; POL 27 VIET S 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.

Nixon Administration, and Sitton knew he would be blamed.[184] Nixon and Kissinger's obsession with secrecy was in part due to Rogers' and Laird's opposition to the idea of bombing Cambodia. In his memoirs, Nixon says that they "feared the fury of Congress and the media if I expanded the war into Cambodia."[185] In his memoirs, Kissinger says he agreed with Laird, but only because Nixon was in Europe. Kissinger felt that the allied governments would be hard to deal with because they took a public stance of dissociation.[186]

In order to contain any leaks of his plans, Nixon devised a clever scheme. He sent a cable to Bunker through regular channels – in order to facilitate leakage – indicating that he should stop all discussions of bombing. Nixon then sent a top-secret "back channel" message to General Abrams telling him to "ignore the message to Bunker and to continue planning the B-52 strikes on a contingency basis." [187] Haldeman wrote in his diaries that the bombing was called off on March first because "State will not accept responsibility and risk is otherwise too great," he added that Kissinger was very disappointed, probably because, like Nixon, he believed in military force.[188]

In the meantime, Sitton had devised a plan that was "foolproof." Abrams would send out sixty B-52s on a mission. The pilots would be briefed together about targets in South Vietnam. After the normal briefing, some pilots would be taken aside and told that they would receive special instructions once in South Vietnam; this became known as the dual reporting system. Sitton's plan was that twelve of the sixty bombers would actually

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[183] Kissinger, WHY, 243; for more on decision to bomb Cambodia see: Kimball, 124-35; Haldeman, 42-52; Hersh, 54-62; Nixon, 380.
[184] Hersh, 60-1.
[185] Nixon, 380.
[186] Kissinger, *WHY*, 244.
[187] Nixon, 380.
[188] Haldeman, 45.

bomb South Vietnam, while the others would be led into Cambodia without really knowing it.[189]

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The Communist offensive of February 1969 caused a ripple effect through the United States and South Vietnam. When the enemy struck over 100 cities, including Saigon, on February 24, Nixon ordered an investigation to determine whether the enemy attacks were a violation of the agreement that had led to the November 1 bombing halt. The "understanding" was being more clearly defined. One senior policy maker told the *New York Times* that the conditions stated by Johnson had "clearly" been violated.[190] The next day the *New York Times* reported that Nixon's chief advisers had relayed a wide range of military options for dealing with the offensive. All recommended some form of selective bombing of the North, ranging from bombing munitions sites just north of the DMZ to attacking military targets close to Hanoi. Some advisers suggested that the United States protest at the Paris talks rather than use military force.[191] The fact that Nixon allowed this advice to be leaked is an indication that it may have been a form of warning for the Communists.

The Spring '69 offensive reminded the Vietnamese and the American public that the enemy was still capable of striking whenever and wherever he liked. According to Terence Smith of the New York Times, the Communists had refocused world attention on Vietnam when it had been focusing on Europe and the Middle East. The attacks put additional pressure on the Thieu regime by disturbing the domestic situation, and it

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[189] Hersh, 61.
[190] Pete Grose, "Rogers Says Foe's Attacks Will Not Win Concessions," *NYT*, March 4, 1969, p1c6; also see: "Nixon Orders Full Inquiry," editorial, *NYT*, February 24, 1969, p3c7.
[191] William Beacher, "Responses to Offenses Pondered," *NYT*, February 25, 1969, p6c4.

strengthened the hand of the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris by displaying Hanoi's military capability.[192]

More importantly, the enemy, by violating the November 1 understanding, was trying to see how far Nixon could be pushed. A ranking officer in the United States Embassy Saigon told the New York Times that the enemy "base his military strategy here and his bargaining strategy in Paris on the reaction that comes out of the White House."[193] Nixon knew this and he instructed Lodge to forewarn North Vietnam at the sixth formal session of the peace talks on February 27 that continuation of the attacks on South Vietnam would mean that the understanding that had led to the bombing halt had "expired."[194]

Bunker reported that Thieu was confident that the Northern Offensive was "well in hand." Life in South Vietnam's cities was going about as normal and there were no signs of panic (by this time, the Vietnamese people were used to the war). Bunker and Thieu both agreed that the goal of the offensive was to "depress American opinion" and influence the Paris talks.[195]

Despite such talk, the DOS reported that "many, if not most [of the South Vietnamese] believe the allies should retaliate." Thieu claimed that the enemy attacks were "blood-thirsty, barbarous, fanatical, and destitute acts," he added that "public opinion in this country…sees more and more clearly that the Communists have never had a sincere desire for peace."[196] It was officially reported that Thieu would pull his

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[192] Terence Smith, "'Piecemeal' Offensive with political Impact," *NYT*, March 2, 1969, p2c1.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Peter Grose, "US Warns Hanoi Attacks Imperil Haly in Bombing," *NYT*, February 28, 1969, p1c8.
[195] Telegram from Bunker to Rogers, February 25, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-9; box 2817; POL 27 Viet S 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.
[196] Telegram from Saigon to Rogers, February 25, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2817; POL 27 VIET S 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.

delegation out of Paris if Saigon did not get "a favorable reaction" out of the Nixon Administration. It was not, however, made clear what the South Vietnamese considered a favorable reaction. Furthermore, South Vietnamese Vice President Ky announced that he would suggest to Thieu that he bomb Hanoi in retaliation for the shelling, indicating that he did not know what the United States Air Force would do.[197] According to Rogers, when Saigon did recommend that the United States take military action, the Nixon Administration denied their request because of public opinion and Nixon's trip in Europe.[198]

In response to the reactions of the United States and South Vietnam, the NLF charged, probably correctly, that Nixon had "intensified" the war and had also started a "new colonial policy in an effort to gain strength" in Paris.[199] Tran Buu Kiem, the NLF's chief negotiator in Paris, declared that the offensive was an answer to the intensification of the war by Nixon, adding that the offensive would "foil the ambition of the Americans to negotiate from a position of strength."

Kiem carefully avoided mention of North Vietnamese military involvement in the offensive because Hanoi had asserted on February 25 that "the *South* Vietnamese people" had the right to attack United States forces "at any place on Vietnamese territory."[200] According to Vice President Ky, however, the NVA were fighting along with the NLF in the offensive. As proof, he indicated that the offensive was being fought conventionally,

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[197] Telegram from DOS to Paris & Saigon, February 24, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2728; POL 27-14 VIET 2/14/69; GRDS; NACP.
[198] Telegram from Rogers to Lodge, February 24, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2817; POL 27 VIET S 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.
[199] Telegram from DOS to Rome, February 28, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2728; POL 27-14 VIET 2/25/69; GRDS; NACP.
[200] "Hanoi Says Bombing Halt Doesn't Restrict Vietcong," editorial, *NYT*, February 27, 1969, p1c2.

as opposed to the guerrilla war normally fought by the NLF.[201] This was a clear indication that the Communists had broken the conditions of the November 1 understanding; the North's classic rebuttal was that the bombing halt had been unconditional.

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When Nixon returned from Europe on March 2, he was still getting conflicting advice: the JCS and Kissinger were advocating the bombing of Cambodia, but Rogers was concerned about the effects on the peace talks and Laird was concerned that an attempt to keep the bombing secret would backfire. At a press conference on March 4, Nixon warned Hanoi that the United States would not "tolerate" a continuation of the offensive.

Nixon explained that the spring '69 offensive, while less intense, was very similar to the Tet offensive of the year before. He speculated that the offensive had three purposes. The Communists may have been trying to break the morale of the Thieu regime. Or they were seeking to stir American public opinion in an effort force the United States to make concessions in Paris. Or the Communists were trying for an outright military victory, "if a military victory of sorts could be accomplished in South Viet-Nam by the North Vietnamese against our forces there." According to Nixon, the enemy had failed in all three objectives.[202]

Nixon felt that the United States needed to look at the offensive in terms of the November 1 understanding. The understanding, as Nixon saw it, was that continued

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[201] Telegram from Paris to Rogers, February 27, 1969; RG 59; CFPF 1967-69; box 2817; POL 27 VIET S 2/1/69; GRDS; NACP.
[202] Nixon, "A Report on Our Foreign Relations," *DOS* Publication 8445, General Foreign Policy Series 230 (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1969). 7-8.

shelling or attacks on the major cities of South Vietnam was inconsistent with productive talks in Paris. Nixon declared that "technically" the offensive was a violation of the understanding, adding: "whether we reach the conclusion that the violation is so significant that it requires action on our part is a decision we will be reaching very soon if those attacks continue at their present magnitude."[203]

Nixon was very upset because the United States casualty rate had doubled since the offensive began. He was correct in believing that he could not analyze what steps the United States should take without considering his "obligation to defend American fighting men in Viet-Nam." As a warning to Hanoi, he said:

> We have not moved in a precipitate fashion, but the fact that we have shown patience and forbearance should not be considered as a sign of weakness. We will not tolerate a continuation of a violation of an understanding. But more than that, we will not tolerate attacks which result in heavier casualties to our men at a time when we are honestly trying to seek peace at the conference table in Paris. An appropriate response to these attacks will be made if they continue.[204]

Nixon went on to discuss other foreign policy matters. He spoke of the problems in the Middle East, and of the chances of an East-West summit. In these and other matters, he indicated that the Atlantic alliance "deserves our attention, should be the center of our concern, should not be taken for granted. It will not be. That will be a major objective of this administration."[205] Although he went on to tell the audience that there were no plans to withdraw troops from Vietnam anytime in the near future, it seems apparent that that the dual goal of withdrawal from Vietnam and a refocusing of attention on Europe went hand-in-hand.

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[203] Ibid, 7-8.
[204] Ibid, 7-8.
[205] Ibid, 3.

With the increase in American casualties, there was a growing consensus among Americans and their allies that the United States needed to retaliate. At another press conference on March 14, Nixon was asked whether his patience was wearing thin, he replied: You may recall that on March 4, when I received a similar question…I issued what was interpreted widely as a warning. It will be my policy as president to issue a warning only once, and I will not repeat it now. Anything in the future that is done will be done. There will be no additional warning."[206] This was Nixon's unique way of issuing another warning to Hanoi.

The next day, March 15, the Communists fired five rockets into Saigon. This was the last straw. Kissinger wrote that at 3:35 pm that day he received a call from an emphatic Nixon, who ordered an immediate B-52 attack on Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. Nixon added: "State is to be notified only after the point of no return…The order is not appealable." Kissinger again advised Nixon to be cautious, if only to protect the President "if it lead to a public uproar."[207]

Nixon met with Kissinger, Rogers, Laird, and Wheeler in the Oval Office. According to Kissinger and Kimball, Nixon had already decided to bomb Cambodia before the meeting, but he wanted to see who was against him. Rogers was the only one who objected; he was afraid that he would run into a "buzz saw" in Congress when the affair calmed down.[208] Nixon said that short of bombing North Vietnam, this was the only military action he could take "that might succeed in saving American lives and

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[206] Quoted in Kimball, 134.
[207] Kissinger, *WHY*, 245.
[208] Kissinger, *WHY*, 246; Kimball, 134.

getting the peace negotiations moving."[209] In any case, Nixon ordered what came to be known as operation BREAKFAST, to be executed on March 17. According to Haldeman's diaries, Kissinger came in the next day "beaming" because BREAKFAST was a "great success."[210] Thus began Nixon's decent into the "quagmire" of Vietnam.

Kissinger said that the Administration decided to bomb Cambodia not out of a desire to expand the war, but rather to "blunt an unprovoked offensive," while refraining from bombing North Vietnam.[211] Hersh believes that the bombing of Cambodia was Nixon's way of threatening the Communists, similar to Ike's threats to use nuclear bombs in Korea.[212] Ambrose argues that Nixon decided to try an offensive against the Ho Chi Minh Trail because "he realized that the great American air offensive…code name Rolling Thunder, had failed to break the will of the North Vietnamese, while adding greatly to the numbers in the antiwar movement at home…[and because] the great American ground offensive…had failed to destroy the NVA."[213]

Mann, however, is more convincing when he argues that Nixon "hoped that precipitate action would unnerve the North Vietnamese and cause them to begin dealing seriously with American negotiators."[214] Nixon told Haldeman that he wanted Hanoi to believe he was mad. Nixon declared, "We'll just slip the word to them that 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry – and he has his hand on the nuclear button.'" This, Nixon assured Haldeman, would make Ho Chi Minh himself come to Paris "begging for peace."[215]

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[209] Nixon, 381.
[210] Haldeman, 51.
[211] Kissinger, WHY, 240-41.
[212] Hersh, 53.
[213] Ambrose, 256.
[214] Mann, 360.
[215] Kimball, 76.

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After Nixon made the decision to bomb Cambodia, his policy began to take shape. He had been very indecisive about what he was going to do until the North Vietnamese embarrassed him. He was going to block Communist supply routes while trying to negotiate from a position of power. Unfortunately, this process would take too long; in part owing to Nixon's desire for victory. Hersh indicates that Nixon's fundamental goal of victory in Vietnam had its roots in Eisenhower's Korean policy.[216] However, what Nixon did not realize was that he would be unable to get concessions from Hanoi no matter what he did because Hanoi realized that it was only a matter of time before American public opinion forced the Administration out of Vietnam.

Nixon told Haldeman that the war would be won by 1970, but "it must be understood," Nixon told his Chief of staff, "that [the] next 4-5 m[o]nths will be very tough."[217] In fact, the next few months would prove even harder than Nixon had expected. The lack of protests by Prince Sihanouk allowed the bombing raids of Cambodia, collectively called BREAKFAST, to remain secret and thus to continue for more than a year. Fear of leaks prompted Nixon to tighten security and tap White House aides. Yet the North Vietnamese sanctuaries were still running after a year and Breakfast and the wiretaps would eventually become know to the public, ruining Nixon's career.

Later that year in June 1969, Nixon would make a half-hearted attempt to withdraw troops, announcing the withdrawal of only 25,000 GIs. By mid 1970, discontent over America's continued involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia led to demonstrations at universities across the nation, climaxing with the shooting deaths of

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[216] Hersh, 51.
[217] Haldeman, 53.

four students at Kent State University. Nixon continued to withdraw troops from Vietnam at a slow pace, with 334.6oo troops in county at the end of 1970 and 156, 800 at the end of 1971. On January 23, 1973 an agreement was finally reached in Paris. The war, however, continued between North and South Vietnam. On March 29 the last American troops left South Vietnam. The next year Nixon resigned because of the Watergate scandal. The year 1975 was highlighted by an un-orderly abandonment of South Vietnam by the Thieu regime and the remaining American officials.[218]

[218] For chronology and numbers, see Langguth, 675-6.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I had intended to argue that Nixon should have pulled all troops out of Vietnam immediately, regardless of the consequences. Proving my position, however, was a very difficult task. In August 1969, eight months after his inauguration, Nixon announced that he would withdraw 25,000 of the half million American GIs stationed in Vietnam. Did Nixon have an opportunity to do more? Or was the situation that he inherited more complicated than the average American realized – then and now? As I did more research, I realized that the situation was indeed much more complicated.

When Nixon took over the difficult situation in Vietnam, his options were poor: full aerial and ground escalation of the war, complete unilateral withdrawal of all American troops from Vietnam, or a negotiated settlement that would probably involve a Communist coalition government for South Vietnam. The goal of the military escalation option of the Rand paper of December 1968 was "to destroy the will and capability of North Vietnam to support insurgency."[219] The supporters of this options believed that ARVN was fighting better than ever, that pacification had made real progress, and that United States operations had been effective – and with fewer restraints could be more so. They were comforted by the fact that the Thieu regime had grown strong due to the inclusion of civilians such as Prime Minister Houng. Furthermore, they believed that Tet had severely damaged the Vietcong's units and that the North Vietnamese population was growing weary of the war.

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[219] Isaacson, 163.

Advocates of American escalation argued that Nixon needed to mobilize the reserves and end Vietnamization. They believed that an attack on North Vietnam would stop Communist troop movements into South Vietnam, that mining Haiphong Harbor would "cripple" Communist supplies, and that operations into Laos and Cambodia would stop the enemies "ability to make hit-and-run attacks against our forces in South Vietnam."[220]

Nixon, however, realized that escalation of this sort certainly had its disadvantages. The mass raids would have killed thousands of civilians in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Escalation would have caused unrest at home, amongst the public and in Congress. Furthermore, it could have destroyed Nixon's plans to develop relations with the Soviet Union and China, not to mention the fact that they may become involved in such an escalation. Therefore, escalation was a very poor option for Nixon.

At the other extreme was the option of unilateral withdrawal, which was very popular with the anti-war movement. Many who favored this option felt that, despite gains made in 1968, the war was unwinnable, and that we therefore needed to "cut our losses." As for credibility, the withdrawal advocates in the Rand paper said "other nations will accept our action because we have met our commitments by large investments of men and resources, and shown wisdom in accepting the situation."[221] They argued, like Kissinger in his *Foreign Relations* article, that the United States had forgotten one of the main rules of guerilla warfare: it had to defeat the Communists in order to win, but Hanoi had only not to lose in order to win. Thus, Hanoi could hold out

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[220] Nixon, 347.
[221] Isaacson, 163.

until the Americans were forced to withdraw their troops, either by public opinion or budget restraints.

Furthermore, there was considerable disagreement with sending more American troops to Vietnam. In March of 1969, in response to Nixon's indication that he would not withdrawal troops immediately in order to consider the appropriate response to the spring offensive, Senator George McGovern said:

> If the Administration is truly flirting with plans to pursue the military effort toward some undefinable victory, then it is setting a disaster course for our country and for the cause of peace…
>
> The war in Vietnam must be ended…There is no more time for "considering military options," no more time for "improving the bargaining position." In the name of decency and common sense, there must be no further continuation of the present war policy, however disguised in rhetoric or more hollow predictions of victory yet to come…I believe the only acceptable objective now is an immediate end to the killing.[222]

However, despite such compelling evidence for unilateral withdrawal, there were no real advocates for such measures with in the government. Furthermore, as the responses to NSSM 1 indicated, there was agreement amongst the key national security agencies that ARVN had strengthened at the end of 1968, but not enough to fight alone against the NVA and the NLF.[223] The Americans needed to provide what Kissinger called a "decent interval," time for Saigon to broaden its political support and for ARVN to improve, in order to avoid the embarrassing retreat that many felt withdrawal would become. Thus to Nixon, who was heavily influenced by the opinion of those in his cabinet, felt this option was also poor.

I would now like to argue that Nixon should have taken measures that involved a combination of the two extremes. In fact, I believe that he should have taken very similar

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[222] Mann, 631-32.
[223] Kimball, 94.

actions to the ones that he would later take, only earlier. I feel that he should have withdrawn more troops in the first year, possibly up to 250,000. Simultaneously he should have continued Vietnamization, while renewing the bombing of North Vietnam and mining Haiphong Harbor – as the United States did in 1972.

As far as the logistics of withdrawing such a large amount of troops was concerned, it was indeed possible to remove up to 250,000 troops by the end of 1969. From December 1970 to December 1971, American troop numbers dwindled from 334,600 to 156,800.[224] Thus Nixon withdrew 177,800 troops in one year. I believe that if the Nixon administration had put its heart into the withdrawal effort, instead of waiting to see how things unfolded, then it would have been able to withdraw more GIs in a single year. Therefore, Nixon's main error was his indecision. Had he been determined, he could have withdrawn up to 250,000 American troops from Vietnam by the end of 1969.

In order to withdraw this many troops without completely abandoning the South Vietnamese, Nixon should have employed the same tactics he would use three years later in 1972. In the spring of 1972, the Communists launched another offensive, similar to the spring offensive of 1969, but much more drastic for the South Vietnamese because the North Vietnamese took numerous cities in northern South Vietnam. In response, Nixon announced what George C. Herring calls "the most dramatic escalation of the war since 1965."[225] Nixon mined Haiphong harbor, set up a naval blockade of North Vietnam, and commenced extensive, unrelenting bombing attacks. The bombing raids, known as operation LINEBACKER, had inflicted severe damage to North Vietnam's

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[224] Langguth, 675.
[225] Herring, 273.

power facilities, railroad system, and petroleum-oil-lubricant system. Furthermore, according to Isaacson, Kissinger felt that, while the mining would do little to blunt the current offensive, it would "sap the communist assurance that it could fight on indefinitely afterward" because most of Hanoi's oil came by sea.[226]

Some would argue that Congress and the American would not support such an escalation of the war. However, while there were immediate Congressional and public criticisms, many newspapers came to Nixon's defense and, depending on which poll you read, between 59 and 79 percent of the public supported Nixon's moves in May 1972. Isaacson feels that Vietnamization had served to "tamp down domestic dissent," and Herring agrees: "The American public had always considered bombing a more acceptable alternative than the use of ground forces…and many Americans felt that the North Vietnamese invasion justified Nixon's response." [227]

Public reaction was very similar to the spring offensive of 1969, when there was a growing sentiment amongst America and her allies that the United States needed to retaliate. However, in 1969, the stakes were much more partial to America. By the time of the 1972 offensive, Nixon had already faced the Congressional challenges caused by his invasion of Cambodia the year before. Thus in 1972, there was little Congressional or public support for Nixon. In 1969, however, he was fresh off an election victory and had what many considered a six-month "honeymoon" before Congress and the public would begin to challenge his policies. Furthermore, at the time of the 1972 offensive, the United States had only 95,000 troops, only 6,000 of which were "combat troops;" in

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[226] Isaacson, 419; see also Kimball, 324.
[227] For statistics, see Kimball, 316; Isaacson, 423; Herring 274.

1969, the United States had a half-million troops in Vietnam.[228] Moreover, as I have already mentioned, ARVN was considered to be at its height in 1969; while it had more training and weapons by 1972, it had also taken many more casualties due to Vietnamization. Thus the withdrawals I suggest would not have interfered with ARVN's defense of South Vietnam, as evidenced by the smaller amount of American troops in 1972 and the effect of the air raids and mining of that same year, and public and Congressional support should have been about the same if not better.

If, however, one still sees this as insufficient, there is another course that could have been combined with the measures I propose here. As mentioned earlier in the paper, Senator George S. McGovern had proposed an end to all United States offensive missions in Vietnam. Instead, he wanted a consolidation of United States forces in "easily defended enclaves." This, he argued, would have saved thousands of American lives as most American troops were killed on search and destroy missions.[229] This process would fit with the withdrawal/Vietnamization scheme that I suggest Nixon should have taken. The remaining troops, after the withdrawal of the 250,000 troops that I suggest, could consist of volunteers, and eventually be diminished to adviser status.

Furthermore, I feel that if Nixon had been more decisive, and taken these steps earlier, as I suggest, then he would have opened other opportunities. First, it would have allowed South Vietnam to eventually have elections free of outside influence. This should have been the Administration's goal in Vietnam because securing South Vietnam's right to self-determination was the Cold War rhetoric that America had used to justify involvement in Vietnam in the first place. Whether the Communists were elected

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[228] Herring, 271.
[229] Ben A. Franklin, "Churchmen Open Drive to End War," *NYT*, February 4, 1969, p24c4.

as a part of a coalition government, or not, was none of America's business, and the idea of a "domino theory", in which the Communists might take over all of Southeast Asia as a result, was outdated by the time Nixon became president.

I agree with journalist Michael Lind when he wrote "what the United States needed in 1969 was a Charles de Gaulle" who would have pulled American G.I.s out of the war, saving thousands of their lives. Lind lamented, and I agree, that this "might have preserved public support for defending Indochina by means of airpower." If this support failed, Lind wrote that America's De Gaulle would have used the Communist victory "to rally the American people behind a renewed anti-Soviet crusade in other theaters of the Cold War."[230] Nixon knew that the Soviets were our main enemies, but he felt that Vietnam was still important to the equation because he felt he could "link" Vietnam to other problems between the two superpowers.

One of Nixon's principal concerns, and often his excuse for not withdrawing earlier, was his fear that American credibility would be damaged. Kissinger wrote in his memoirs: "For a great power to abandon a small country to tyranny simply to obtain a respite from our own travail was immoral and harmful to our international efforts." He argued that the United States would not be able to "revitalize the Atlantic Alliance if its governments were assailed by doubt about American staying power."[231] Similarly, Nixon felt that if we reneged on our earlier pledges of support, then we would not receive the trust of other nations. However, what Nixon did not understand, or possibly chose to ignore, is that our allies understood the situation in Vietnam and realized that we had

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[230] Lind, 135.
[231] Kissinger, WHY, 227-28.

done just as much, if not more than any country was capable of doing to aid South Vietnam.

Moreover, our allies in Europe were faced with a Soviet Union that had, for the first time, matched the United States in nuclear capabilities. They were concerned with Soviet actions in Czechoslovakia and the Middle East and preferred that the United States focus on the problems in their region. In a meeting with Kissinger in early 1969, De Gaulle had asked, "Why not withdraw?" Kissinger replied: "A sudden withdrawal might give us a credibility problem." De Gaulle asked where and Kissinger sited the Middle East as an example. De Gaulle concluded: "How very odd, it is precisely in the Middle East that I thought your enemies had a credibility problem."[232] In June 1970, Nixon exemplified our European allies' concerns when he said: "the situation in the Mideast is more dangerous [than Vietnam]…because it involves…a collision of the superpowers!" Nixon went on to say: "Neither Communist China in my view, nor the Soviet Union will have a confrontation with the United States about Viet-Nam."[233] What Nixon needed to realize was that the United States had entered Vietnam because of the Cold War, and that by 1969 it was no longer the theatre in which the Cold War was being fought.

Ultimately counterfactual questions have no correct answer. However, I agree with the conclusion of Group B of the NSSM 1: "The principle US objective of repelling external aggression"[234] had been met by 1969, and I believe that had Nixon taken measures similar to those he took during Operation Linebacker in 1972 earlier in 1969 while withdrawing larger amounts troops than he did, then the United States would not have been breaking the commitment that Johnson had made to South Vietnam.

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[232] Kissinger, WHY, 110.
[233] "A Conversation with the President," 32-34.

Furthermore, the suggestions I make here involve steps that Nixon actually took, and therefore it is a course he was more likely to choose over complete unilateral withdrawal or full escalation of the war.

Had Nixon accomplished such a dramatic withdrawal in his first year in office then the Watergate scandal may never have even taken place.[235] Without such a large troop withdrawal in 1969, Nixon searched for a way to get a better deal in Paris, or possibly even the victory that the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed he could achieve. In the meantime, thousands of more American lives were lost and so was Nixon's opportunity.

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[234] Kimball, 91-96.

[235] Herring argued that it was the release of the Pentagon Papers in the summer of 1971 that led Nixon to create a group of "plumbers" to plug leaks within the government, 267. The plumbers were G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, direct participants in the Watergate scandal, Ambrose 449, 558.

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