Getting Out: Melvin Laird and the Origins of Vietnamization

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Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird was instrumental in initiating America’s withdrawal from Vietnam. Laird’s Vietnamization program— the policy of improving South Vietnamese military capabilities while withdrawing American troops— became the centerpiece of President Richard Nixon’s strategy to end the American War in Vietnam. Vietnamization reflected Laird’s commitment to the preservation of the Republic of Vietnam as well as his determination to quell domestic dissent. In 1969, Laird worked to secure presidential approval for Vietnamization and then keep Nixon’s National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, from replacing it with a more militant foreign policy. Laird ultimately succeeded, and the Nixon administration continued withdrawing U.S. troop from South Vietnam on a regular basis.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Chester J. Pach Jr.

Associate Professor of History
For my parents
Acknowledgments

This work has been the product of many hours of meticulous research, writing, and revising, but it is in no way the product of one man. Many people guided, enriched, and encouraged this thesis, and I consider myself forever in their debt. Its omissions and errors, however, are my own.

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Without the aid of the hard-working people at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, this thesis would never have had the sources necessary to sustain some of its central arguments. In particular, I would like to thank William McNitt who introduced me to the archival system and helped me locate key documents. I was more than a little apprehensive about my first trip to an archive, but the friendly and courteous staff at the Gerald Ford Library quickly put me at ease. Moreover, they went out of their way to review and declassify documents on my behalf.

I would also like to thank former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird whose unexpected generosity continues to amaze me. I never will forget that fateful February night, when while working on the seminar paper that prefigured this thesis, I received a
surprise telephone call from Laird himself. While Laird has provided me with priceless conversations and leads, perhaps his biggest contribution to my present and future work was that first phone call. For a new generation of scholars born after the Vietnam War, it is all too easy to forget that we are writing about real people and events. Laird brought that realization home to me, and as a result, I have shown greater diligence to test my assumptions and portray events as accurately as possible.

On that same note, I would like to thank Melvin Laird’s personal secretary Kathy Weaver. Working with Laird, she has made certain I received important documents and articles. She has also made sure my work has reached Secretary Laird for his comments. Finally, she has shown great patience in putting up with my questions as well as my attempts to schedule a formal interview with Laird.

I would be remiss if I did not thank two of my thesis defense committee members, Marvin Fletcher and Kevin Mattson. Both provided insightful comments on the thesis while raising great questions I had not even thought to ask. I anticipate working with them again in the future.

I also owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my advisor, Chester Pach. Dr. Pach suggested I look into Vietnamization as I began searching for a topic that utilized recently declassified Nixon administration documents. As I began delving deeper into Vietnamization, Dr. Pach continued to provide timely advice despite having his own heavy workload. Perhaps most valuable of all was his thorough comments on each of the thesis’s revisions. They made for a much better thesis, and I look forward to continue studying under such an excellent scholar.
Most important of all have been the love, support, and encouragement of my family: my wonderful sister Amy and my parents, Russell and Ann Prentice. Words cannot describe how much they mean to me, and so I will keep it relatively short. God could not have blessed me with a more loving family, and I will always treasure my time spent with them. Although I am presently far away from my home in Caddo, their encouraging phone calls and thoughtful care packages remind me that life is so much more than books and study. It is for my parents that I have dedicated this thesis.
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Introduction

Vietnam was America’s longest war. In part, American apathy towards Vietnam provided President Lyndon Johnson with a “permissive context” that allowed him to escalate and then Americanize this conflict by deploying U.S. Marines in early 1965. While America’s role in Vietnam preceded 1965, Johnson’s commitment of large numbers of U.S. troops steadily ended America’s disinterest towards Vietnam. Indeed, after three years of intense ground fighting and thousands of U.S. casualties, an increasing number of Americans wanted the United States out of Vietnam.

This thesis explains how one man helped initiate America’s departure from Vietnam. Richard Nixon’s first Secretary of Defense, Melvin R. Laird, was the key architect and proponent of America’s exit strategy, Vietnamization-- the policy of improving South Vietnamese military capabilities while withdrawing American troops. Although Washington bureaucrats and politicians had discussed both components of Vietnamization during the Johnson administration, Laird was the policymaker who assimilated the two and then turned it into a viable policy in 1969. Laird championed Vietnamization in order to alleviate domestic pressure to end the war on any terms. As a staunch anticommunist, he remained committed to the preservation of a non-communist South Vietnam, but he also believed that events within the United States necessitated a change in its conduct of the war. Laird’s sixteen years as a congressional representative made him adept at reading public opinion, and he, like many other Americans, witnessed the mounting domestic unrest in 1967-1969. Therefore, Laird felt obligated to defuse the

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ticking time bomb of domestic opinion before it exploded into something worse than the social chaos that defined 1968. Vietnamization was his tool of choice.

In the process, Vietnamization limited the diplomatic and military options available to President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, creating a bureaucratic struggle within the Nixon administration. These two foreign policy giants saw their plans constrained by Melvin Laird and Vietnamization. Nixon had great confidence in his ability to negotiate an end to the war and assented to Vietnamization’s implementation in mid-1969 because he believed a diplomatic settlement was not far off. Always the realist, Kissinger believed Laird’s plan for disengagement would hinder peace negotiations with North Vietnam. For Kissinger, nations had to back their diplomacy with credible and effective force, and reducing U.S. troop strength would only diminish U.S. leverage in peace talks. Conversely, Laird believed that without these withdrawals American and congressional opinion would soon demand an immediate end to the war. The resulting rift within the Nixon administration over Vietnam strategy threatened to derail Vietnamization. Laird’s use of his political acumen and congressional connections to win approval for and then implement Vietnamization is a testament to the ability of an individual to shape history.

The effects of domestic unrest and bureaucratic infighting over American foreign policy are the two main themes of the thesis, but the spotlight will be on Melvin Laird. No other individual played such a decisive role in the creation and implementation of Vietnamization. It is therefore necessary to explain how he became the champion of this

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2 Interview of Melvin R. Laird by Maurice Matloff and Alfred Goldberg, September 2, 1986, folder “Laird-Oral History Interviews (1),” Box D8, LP.
plan in 1968 and 1969 as well as how he was able to carry out Vietnamization in spite of Kissinger’s hostility to it.

Until his appointment as Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird was a leading Republican congressman from Wisconsin, and the evolution of his stance on Vietnam during his congressional years (1953-1969) provides insight into his subsequent Vietnamization policy. Representative Laird took great interest in foreign affairs and consistently advocated a tough stand on communism. Although his belligerent rhetoric categorized him as a hawk, Laird was at best a “cautious hawk,” or as his longtime assistant William Baroody aptly noted, “Laird was neither a dove nor a hawk but a dawk.”3 In order to defend the Republic of Vietnam, Laird wanted to deploy America’s air and naval resources against North Vietnam in the early 1960s but was always against the commitment of U.S. ground forces. Laird proclaimed that another American land war in Asia would be a foolish endeavor and that air and naval campaigns could accomplish the same objective without the political and human sacrifices associated with a protracted ground war. After President Lyndon Johnson Americanized the Vietnam War, Laird went from a “cautious hawk” to reluctant dove, though. Large numbers of U.S. soldiers did little to stabilize South Vietnam, and Laird grew increasingly pessimistic about the war’s possible outcome. Yet, he continued looking for some way to preserve the Republic of Vietnam. By the beginning of 1968, Laird was moving towards a strategy centered on the modernization and expansion of South Vietnam’s army.4

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Nineteen sixty-eight’s social turmoil, political fallout from the Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops, and election year politics explain the origin of the unilateral withdrawal element of Laird’s Vietnamization. Across the globe, 1968 was a year of protests and international unrest. As historian Jeremi Suri put it, “The entire world shook in 1968. Across cultures, people of all generations recognized the significance of the moment. A global wave of urban protests produced a crisis of authority in nearly every society.” From racial riots to antiwar protests, Washington decision makers saw a society that appeared on the brink of social collapse. They had no way of knowing that after 1968 the worst had passed. For all they knew, 1969 could become much worse, and these fears provided the impetus to redeploy troops from Vietnam. Like other policymakers, Laird hoped that by deescalating the war, he could reduce tensions at home.\(^5\)

The 1968 Tet Offensive prompted Washington’s first real debate on the war since Americanization began in 1965, and this deliberation set the bureaucratic stage for Vietnamization. The March 1968 meeting of the Wise Men began the Johnson administration’s first steps towards disengaging from South Vietnam. This select group included the founding fathers of postwar U.S. foreign policy, and so their recommendations for disengagement carried considerable weight. Disengagement did not mean Vietnamization and unilateral withdrawal, though. The Wise Men’s pessimistic pronouncements merely stabilized the war’s hostilities by emphasizing negotiations, calling for a halt of the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, and discouraging further

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American troop increases in South Vietnam. Although LBJ would not act on several of their suggestions until late in the year, the Wise Men set in motion planning for the war’s end.

While this bureaucratic development unfolded, Nixon’s 1968 election campaign introduced the American people to the concept of Vietnamization. Throughout the campaign, Nixon asserted that as South Vietnamese forces became stronger, U.S. soldiers could leave South Vietnam. Unlike the Johnson administration’s planning, Nixon’s plan did not require the simultaneous withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces, a distinction that separated Vietnamization from previous foreign policy proposals. Although Nixon lacked any secret plan to end the Vietnam War, his campaign rhetoric provided Laird with a rough outline of Vietnamization.

After Nixon named him Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird immediately began turning Vietnamization into a formal plan, and the first few months of the Nixon administration proved the most important in terms of Vietnamization’s development. During this formative period, Kissinger made the mistake of trying to gum up the government’s foreign policy apparatus. Kissinger believed that by forcing the various government agencies to reconcile their differing foreign policy goals, he could tie up the bureaucracy for a year, giving him and Nixon the time they needed to end the war using power politics.6 Kissinger miscalculated, though. Kissinger’s National Security Council foundered on his questions, and this blunder allowed Laird to propose a definitive plan while Kissinger and his staff were trying to get their bearings. Indeed, Laird and his staff focused their attention on Vietnamization, choosing to ignore the bureaucratic wrangling

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over Vietnam strategy. Vietnamization was Laird’s plan, and he would not deviate from it. As a result, Laird had secured Nixon’s approval for Vietnamization by the end of March 1969.

Laird’s planning came to fruition on June 8, 1969 when President Nixon announced the first U.S. troop withdrawals at Midway Island, but administration policymakers contested the meaning of this development. Americans reacted favorably to the news that the Nixon administration would remove 25,000 U.S. troops by August 31, 1969, but Kissinger feared that Nixon had made a grave mistake. Kissinger told the president, “Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public: The more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded.”7 Also noticing this sentiment, Secretary of Defense Laird reached a far different conclusion. Laird believed that withdrawals mollified American opinion, giving the Nixon administration time to build up South Vietnamese forces and ultimately end the war. Laird was all too eager to increase America’s intake of “salted peanuts.”

After Midway, Laird continued to develop Vietnamization, but he now faced open hostility from Kissinger. For his part, Laird worked with military officials to increase the number of troops the Nixon administration would withdraw. Laird prepared varying withdrawal timetables and only presented those that Nixon and the military would accept. Laird’s goal was to remove all U.S. forces but he shrewdly hid this objective from those who would oppose him. Meanwhile, Kissinger used his staff for an entirely different purpose. By the end of September, Kissinger had sent Nixon several memos urging him

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7 Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, September 10, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:372.
to adopt a tougher Vietnam policy and move away from Vietnamization. In particular, Kissinger wanted Nixon to issue an ultimatum to North Vietnam. If Hanoi did not comply, the president should halt troop withdrawals and authorize a decisive air and naval campaign against North Vietnam to force them to comply with America’s terms. Nixon seriously considered Kissinger’s proposal, but foreign and domestic events steered him away from this action. Laird’s political prowess also made any confrontation over Vietnamization a precarious venture that would only intensify antiwar sentiment. Additionally, Laird’s faith in Vietnamization helped win over the president. Nixon’s November 3, 1969 “Silent Majority” speech established Vietnamization as America’s principal exit strategy from Vietnam and promised continued withdrawals of American ground forces regardless of progress at the bargaining table. Thus, Laird was able to continue Vietnamization despite Kissinger’s best efforts to stop the war’s de-escalation.

Unfortunately, the origins of Vietnamization remain one of the least explored areas of Vietnam War historiography. As it now stands, there is currently no major work on how Vietnamization originated and more importantly, how the Nixon administration implemented it. While James Willbanks’s Abandoning Vietnam provides a good history of Vietnamization and its ramifications in South Vietnam, it devotes less than twenty pages to the origins of Vietnamization as a strategy. So far, Willbanks’s concise chapter on the subject is the best historians can find in the secondary literature. Other major works, like Larry Berman’s No Peace, No Honor and Jeffrey Kimball’s Nixon’s Vietnam War, chronicle Nixon’s Vietnam policy but give short shrift to Vietnamization and

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Laird’s role in shaping Nixon’s foreign policy. Instead, Berman and Kimball depict Nixon and Kissinger as foreign policy giants with exclusive control over America’s Vietnam strategy.

Indeed, their oversight is indicative of the historiography as a whole. Perhaps because the president and secretary of state are generally the twin pillars of executive foreign policy, historians have overlooked Laird’s agenda setting role as secretary of defense. Moreover, Laird was never as flamboyant as Kissinger was, and so it was only natural that the media and historians would gravitate toward the latter. Finally, Kissinger’s diplomatic endeavors, particularly détente, the opening to communist China, and the Paris Peace Accords ending the Vietnam War, earned him the reputation as being a foreign policy juggernaut. Of course by this point, Laird’s Vietnamization strategy had significantly shaped administration foreign policy by effectively ending America’s presence in the Vietnamese ground war. Lacking the glamour and the drama of Kissinger’s showboating diplomacy, Laird’s Vietnamization has remained on the periphery of Vietnam War historiography.

Yet, understanding Vietnamization, particularly Melvin Laird’s role in its creation and implementation, is fundamental to discovering how the United States ended its involvement in Vietnam. Historians need a detailed study of Vietnamization because getting out of a war is always more difficult than getting into one, and the saga again demonstrates the agency of historical actors. Laird was instrumental in this process, and without his mitigating influence, it is quite likely the Nixon administration would have taken a more belligerent path. In short, an examination of Laird’s role in U.S. foreign
policy gives historians a better understanding of Vietnamization’s origins as well as the uncertainty of its implementation.
1. The Pessimist’s Unshakable Commitment to South Vietnam

“I am neither a ‘hawk’ nor a ‘dove’ on Vietnam but rather a pessimist.”
~ Melvin Laird, 1967

From 1960 to 1967, Americans witnessed the continued expansion of their nation’s commitment to the preservation of the Republic of Vietnam. The decade began with about 900 military personnel in South Vietnam, but by the end of 1967, nearly half a million American soldiers were on the ground in Southeast Asia. Few men and women foresaw this development, but then again, before the war became an American conflict, very few people paid much attention to events in Indochina.

Melvin Laird stood in stark contrast to this public apathy, and his pronouncements on Vietnam before 1968 shed light on the origins of Vietnamization. Three themes run throughout these statements: an aversion to U.S. troop deployments, an increasingly pessimistic outlook on the chances for American success in Southeast Asia, and a persistent commitment to the South Vietnamese government. First, Laird saw South Vietnam as an integral part of Cold War strategy and he was prepared to commit American resources to its survival, but his escalatory rhetoric sought to avoid an Americanized land war in Asia. Laird urged policymakers to play to U.S. strengths by initiating an intensive air and naval campaign against communist North Vietnam. Feeling that escalation on the ground would only result in a dangerous land war, he consistently spoke out against President Lyndon B. Johnson’s commitment of U.S. troops to South Vietnam.

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Second, events made him increasingly pessimistic about the U.S. ability to preserve a non-communist South Vietnam. The neutralization of Laos in 1962 allowed communist forces to infiltrate South Vietnam, and Laird believed President Johnson’s April 1965 Johns Hopkins speech set the stage for unconditional negotiations that could lead to a coalition government in South Vietnam that included communists. Even the deployment of American troops and an air campaign against North Vietnam did little to stabilize South Vietnam. Laird feared the 1966 Manila Communiqué, which called for the mutual withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces within six months of a peace agreement, had created the possibility of a quick withdrawal of U.S. forces, leaving South Vietnam vulnerable to the communist insurgency. After each of these events, Laird admitted that it was becoming more difficult to guarantee the Republic of Vietnam’s survival, but he never stopped looking for some means to achieve this goal.

Finally, Laird remained committed to preserving South Vietnam throughout this trying period. His pronouncements on Vietnam usually came in the form of dichotomies where one of the two alternatives included an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces in Southeast Asia, but he always favored the other option. For instance, after the release of the Manila Communiqué, Laird told Congress “I see only two realistic choices facing us today: reaffirm our original objective and proceed from there; or pull out of Vietnam before another drop of American blood is needlessly spilled.”10 Laird decidedly favored the former and was never willing to sacrifice men and arms to achieve a peace that ultimately gave communists control of South Vietnam. Even when he was not sure what

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America’s course would be, he consistently searched for some way to preserve the Republic of Vietnam while minimizing American casualties.

Melvin Laird was certainly a strange combination of dove and hawk. Laird believed in American airpower but doubted the efficacy of U.S. ground troops. As the Vietnam War wore on, Laird became increasingly doubtful that either could save South Vietnam, yet he refused to give up on that beleaguered nation. Thus, from 1960-1967, Laird was a man searching for a way to preserve the Republic of Vietnam without using large numbers of American soldiers. The U.S.-sponsored buildup and modernization of the South Vietnamese military became his solution to this dilemma, and one can see the roots of this aspect of Vietnamization in his statements and actions through 1967.

Melvin Laird’s formative years gave him firsthand experience with both politics and war. Born on September 1, 1922, Laird grew up in Marshfield, Wisconsin in a family well acquainted with the state’s politics. His maternal grandfather had been the state’s lieutenant governor. Laird’s father, Melvin R. Laird Sr., served as a state senator from 1941-46, and Laird Jr. often spoke on his father’s behalf in campaigns. Laird’s mother was also active in local and national politics through community organizations and as a delegate to the 1948 Republican National Convention. Thus, even at a young age, Laird was no stranger to politics.

Like millions of young men from his generation, Laird served in the Second World War. Laird enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942 and served in the Pacific Ocean on

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the *USS Maddox*\(^{13}\) where he worked as an officer in charge of dispersing money and supplies. During his military service, Laird received the Purple Heart as the result of an injury from a Japanese kamikaze attack on the *Maddox*. The plane struck the wardroom Laird was in, killing the other nine men in the room and critically injuring Laird. After his service, Laird returned home with some shrapnel still in his body and a firsthand experience with war that would temper his hawkishness as a policymaker.\(^{14}\)

Soon after his arrival back in the United States, Melvin Laird found himself directly involved in politics. His father unexpectedly passed away in 1946, leaving his state senate seat open. Laird quickly stepped in to fill this vacancy, and at age 23, he became the youngest senator in Wisconsin’s history. Laird’s outgoing personality made a career in politics a natural choice for him, and his father’s reputation as a state senator facilitated his election.\(^{15}\) After six years in the state senate, Laird ran as a Republican for the U.S. Congress in Wisconsin’s seventh congressional district. His 1952 electoral victory marked the start of a promising congressional career that would last until he became Secretary of Defense in 1969.\(^{16}\)

Although Laird saw an active role for America on the global stage, his congressional district had been a bastion of isolationism before the start of World War II.\(^{17}\) This lingering sentiment helped the young congressman determine how far U.S. foreign policy could go before it jeopardized its domestic support. While the views of his

\(^{13}\) This ship is the same *USS Maddox* (DD-731) that would be involved in the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

\(^{14}\) Laird, *A Mind of Her Own*, 239-252.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 281, 341.


\(^{17}\) Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change*, 110.
constituents delineated an acceptable foreign policy, they did not curtail Laird’s interest in international affairs. As a member of the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, Laird made frequent pronouncements on foreign policy and worked with other prominent Republicans to develop a party consensus on these issues.

One of the earliest examples of Laird’s work in this area was a report entitled “American Strategy and Strength.” Although Laird was only one of the fifteen Republican congressional representatives that contributed to the 1960 document, it contained several of Laird’s fundamental assumptions about U.S. foreign policy. The brief report asserted that Cold War strategy must look beyond survival and instead strive to promote stability and republican ideals worldwide. Not only did such a strategy necessitate the maximum use of America’s resources, it required the public’s enthusiastic support. Whether Democrat or Republican, the president must work with Congress to develop and implement an American strategy. The report concluded that the creation of this strategy against communism was “America’s moral responsibility” and a matter of national survival.18

His book, *A House Divided* (1962), provides the best understanding of how Laird viewed the Cold War world in the early 1960s and how he envisioned America’s grand strategy. The title of the work refers to Laird’s belief that differences over strategy divided Americans, leaving the free world susceptible to the expansionist communist

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18 “American Strategy and Strength,” June, 20 1960, folder “Misc.,” Box D1, LP.
Above all else, *A House Divided* makes it clear that Laird was an ardent cold warrior who ruled out peaceful coexistence with international communism.

Unlike most of his contemporaries in the 1960s, Laird looked beyond mutual assured destruction (MAD). MAD assumed that nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States would result in the total annihilation of both countries and that this fact would deter the two nations from going to war with one another. Following this reasoning, many U.S. policymakers made it their chief objective to prevent a hot war with the Soviets. In *A House Divided*, Laird strongly criticized this rationale. Laird wrote,

> In the moral and civilizational crisis in which we are involved, the sheer awe of nuclear power has led many Americans, and their elected and appointed officials, to forget the human values of the conditions of life and to become obsessed by the purely animal values of survival.\footnote{Melvin R. Laird, “America’s Strategy Gap: Response Must Give Way to Initiative,” speech before Yale Political Union, December 4, 1962, folder “Speeches-12/4/62-America’s Strategy Gap,” Box A16, LP.}

Rather than focusing on merely surviving the Cold War, policymakers should find ways to win it. Laird believed they should not rule out certain strategies and tactics but consider every alternative, including the option of a nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union and the use of limited nuclear reprisals. For Laird, the preservation of democratic values at home and their encouragement abroad morally justified the use of America’s military power.\footnote{Melvin R. Laird, *A House Divided: America’s Strategy Gap* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1962), 50.}

Indeed, Laird saw the Cold War as a world battle pitting civilization against communism. According to Laird, nuclear equity between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. would...
invite Soviet aggression and expansion. Only outright American military superiority could preserve freedom. Laird wrote, “On the day that the Soviet Union feels there is, indeed a balance of power...nuclear war will become not only thinkable but in all likelihood inevitable. On that day we will not be losing the so-called cold war; we will have lost it.” Similarly, there was no room for peaceful competition between the free and communist worlds. Rather, U.S. policymakers should capitalize on their nation’s superiority to rollback communism in eastern Europe and the Third World. Given this grim outcome, Laird maintained that America’s primary goal must be the eradication of communism, and his strategy for the 1960s flowed from this train of thought.  

As Laird himself acknowledged, his grand strategy closely resembled President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s “New Look” strategy from the 1950s. One of the fundamental tenets of the “New Look” was its focus on initiative. Rather than responding to communist aggression in kind, “New Look” policymakers would choose an asymmetrical response designed to apply America’s strengths against the enemies’ weaknesses. For instance, should communist ground forces threaten to overrun an American ally, the United States would utilize its superior air, naval, or nuclear weaponry to deter the aggression. Instead of maintaining an expensive conventional force, Eisenhower and Dulles built up America’s nuclear weaponry as the deterrent of choice. Thus, Laird’s own “strategy of initiative,” with its emphasis on asymmetrical response and nuclear superiority, was in part a throwback to

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22 Ibid., 34, 51, 143, 177.
23 Ibid., 61-62, 93.
Republican foreign policy in the 1950s. Laird simply took Eisenhower’s New Look policy one step further by advocating the deliberate eradication of world communism.²⁴

Laird believed that as long as America had a preponderance of power over the Soviet Union and its allies, communists would continue to rely on their own asymmetrical response: sublimited or guerilla warfare. Whereas Laird defined a limited war as a small-scale conflict between Soviet and American forces, he defined sublimited warfare as wars of liberation between Soviet proxies and the United States. Laird wrote that by utilizing local forces this type of warfare “will be waged by propagandizing and terrorizing native populations, by playing upon so-called anti-colonialism, by alliance with local Communist parties, or merely nationalist parties which the Communists will infiltrate.” America must not allow these wars of liberation to distract it from its overall objective of defeating communism, though. Instead, the United States should continue to maintain its nuclear superiority while regaining situational control of areas experiencing sublimited warfare.²⁵

As *A House Divided* rolled off the presses in late 1962, most observers pointed to Southeast Asia as the primary focal point of sublimited warfare, and Laird provided his own strategy for defeating communism in that troubled region. Laird argued that policymakers must first abandon the notion that they can divide the region into isolated areas. For Laird, it was ludicrous to negotiate a settlement with communists in Laos while pledging to defend neighboring South Vietnam. In other words, an effective

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strategy must deal with the whole region. Laird further argued that only a strategy of
initiative could preserve the Republic of Vietnam. Laird wrote,

> The tragedy of our present struggle in South Vietnam is that we-- with
vastly superior tactics-- are following a defensive strategy through which
we have handed neighboring Laos to the aggressor and restricted our
struggle in Vietnam by impossible limitations. If we continue this
approach to sublimited aggression, we are doomed to eventual defeat.26

Laird’s solution would be an offensive strategy that accounted for physical terrain
and America’s strengths. Using soldiers drawn from the South East Asian Treaty
Organization’s members, the United States must secure the mountain passes in Laos and
North Vietnam. Fearing that the Chinese would enter the war as they did in Korea, Laird
argued that allied helicopter forces would also have to hold those passes that Chinese
communists could use to enter North Vietnam. As a part of this no border approach, the
United States would encourage and support invasions of North Vietnam by South
Vietnamese forces. Laird would have also brought America’s air and naval power
against North Vietnam, targeting the key cities of Hanoi and Haiphong while establishing
beachheads for South Vietnamese incursions into North Vietnam. Although bold in
nature, these initiatives fit Laird’s overall objective: the eradication of communism in
Southeast Asia and eventually the world.27

So fervent was the book’s anti-communist rhetoric, it can become difficult for one
to see how the principal proponent of Vietnamization also wrote *A House Divided*, yet
several of the book’s themes resolve this apparent discrepancy. Laird’s grand strategy
always emphasized the use of American air, naval, and nuclear weaponry. The

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26 Ibid., 102-103.
27 Ibid., 104-107, 111, 177.
commitment of U.S. soldiers would be a measure of last resort, especially in communist-inspired wars of liberation. Laird’s aversion to the use of American ground forces stemmed from his firm belief that a strategy of initiative similar to Eisenhower’s “New Look” could deter guerilla wars with minimal cost. By ratcheting up the level of escalation, U.S. policymakers could deter communist aggression without committing forces to guerilla conflicts where the enemy had the greater advantage. Indeed, Laird believed that Eisenhower had successfully ended the Korean War not by sending in more U.S. troops but by threatening to bomb north of the Yalu River, blockade the Chinese coast, and use tactical nuclear weapons. Each of these measures would have applied direct military pressure where communist China was weakest, and as Eisenhower expected, the threat was enough to force a truce. Laird also thought that the commitment of soldiers to Third World conflicts distracted the United States from its real conflict with the Soviet Union. Laird’s Vietnamization policy would ultimately redeploy American forces so that the country could focus on its struggle against the Soviet Union but it also reflected Laird’s strategic aversion to U.S. land wars in the Third World.  

A House Divided also prefigured Vietnamization by showing the domestic element of Laird’s strategy. Although he discounted the need to have world opinion behind U.S. foreign policy, Laird argued that America’s Cold War strategy needed domestic support to achieve long-term success. According to Laird, policymakers should educate the American people on international necessities in order to sustain their anticommunism because without widespread domestic support for foreign policy, the

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28 Ibid., 61, 93, 176.  
29 Ibid., 27-28, 134.
United States would lose the Cold War. Laird saw America’s efforts in South Vietnam as part of a much larger struggle against the Soviet Union, and victory in Vietnam was never worth compromising this larger objective. It is also important to note that Laird’s assessment remained fluid. As events changed the domestic situation in America and the balance of power in Southeast Asia, Laird’s opinion of the conflict became increasingly pessimistic. Nonetheless, the core themes of *A House Divided* provided the backbone for Laird’s congressional pronouncements on Vietnam as well as his later work on Vietnamization.

Laird’s pessimism was already at a heightened level by the time the book hit store shelves. The small nation of Laos always played a key role in Laird’s Southeast Asian strategy, and he believed that its neutralization in 1962 would have disastrous consequences for America’s mission in South Vietnam. For Laird, making Laos a neutral country with a coalition government was tantamount to handing it over to the communist forces. Thus, understanding Laos becomes vital to comprehending Laird’s increasingly grim outlook on the preservation of a non-communist South Vietnam.

Formerly part of French Indochina, Laos was the small, landlocked nation that ran along North and South Vietnam’s western borders. Its significance in the Vietnam War stemmed from the fact that the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through its territory. First carved through the jungle in 1959, the Ho Chi Minh trail became the main conduit for North Vietnamese troops and supplies into South Vietnam. Laos also offered a fallback position for the Vietcong (South Vietnamese communists) when the South Vietnamese government held the upper hand.
Even before the construction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Laos played a prominent role in U.S. policy for the region. As France withdrew its formal presence from Indochina in the mid-1950s, the Eisenhower administration stepped in to defend Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam from communist expansion. Throughout the 1950s, America’s goal was nothing short of maintaining a non-communist Laos. The United States provided pro-Western forces with large amounts of aid and initiated a right-wing coup in pursuit of this objective. As neutralist and anti-American forces gained ground in Laos, President Eisenhower considered intervening militarily, but as time ran out on his administration, it became clear that he would have to leave that decision to his successor.30

The Southeast Asian crisis that demanded President John F. Kennedy’s immediate attention in 1961 centered on Laos, not South Vietnam. Whereas Eisenhower saw Laos as vital to the success of U.S. efforts in Indochina and rejected any neutralization agreement, President Kennedy concluded just the opposite. Laotian geography would make U.S. military intervention an extremely difficult undertaking. JFK’s recent refusal to save pro-Western Cuban rebels as they floundered at the Bay of Pigs would make it politically difficult for him to justify sending troops to far-away Laos. Furthermore, the Bay of Pigs debacle shook Kennedy’s faith in his military advisors, making him reluctant to accept their advice on Laos.31 Finally, the pessimistic assessment of other Western leaders confirmed Kennedy’s own doubts. By the end of April 1961, the president had

30 Herring, America’s Longest War, 47, 85-86.
opted for a diplomatic solution to the Laotian predicament. Neutralization was now America’s primary aim in Laos.32

While the vast majority of congressional representatives supported President Kennedy’s decision,33 Representative Melvin Laird was vociferous in his condemnation of the proposed neutralization. In a speech given shortly after the decision, Laird declared that because of Kennedy’s inaction, “Laos slipped away from a pro-Western position and is today undergoing the transformation into a ‘neutrality’ which smacks of communist sympathy.” Laird then proceeded to argue that the proposed neutralization of Laos, coupled with the administration’s failure to salvage the Bay of Pigs invasion, had weakened America’s deterrent credibility and emboldened Soviet leaders to continue testing U.S. resolve. Given the overwhelming congressional support for JFK’s Laotian policy, Laird’s protestations had no effect on key policymakers.34

On July 23, 1962, the Geneva conference settled the neutralization of Laos by creating a coalition government that included communist elements, and this development only intensified Laird’s denunciations of Kennedy’s foreign policy. In a letter to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Laird wrote, “I strongly believe that the net effect of this agreement on Laos will be the intensification of war in Southeast Asia and a weakening of the confidence of free Asians in the value of close cooperation with the United States.”35 Moreover, in a letter to America’s chief negotiator in Geneva, Laird asserted

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that the agreement “was a Communist victory as decisive as Dien Bien Phu”-- the dramatic 1954 battle that symbolized French failure in the First Vietnam War and their subsequent departure from Indochina. Laird delivered these same warnings to his constituents. In a campaign address later that year, Laird declared that President Kennedy’s foreign policy “has already cost us Cuba, Laos and probably all of Southeast Asia.”

Explaining why Laird believed Kennedy’s Laotian policy had probably forfeited all of Southeast Asia to communism goes to the heart of Laird’s nascent pessimism. Political partisanship provides one reason for his rhetoric, but this supposition does not sufficiently explain Laird’s rationale. Instead, Laird’s strategy of initiative supplies a better explanation of his reasoning. Laird believed that the neutralization of Laos would embolden communists to take greater risks while discouraging pro-Western forces, especially those in South Vietnam. Additionally, acceding to a coalition government in Laos would surrender more initiative to international communism and put the United States further on the defensive in Southeast Asia. From a practical standpoint, Laird always maintained that communist control of Laos would open up South Vietnam to communist infiltration and that it would be very difficult for the United States to stop this flow of men and materiel.

These statements should not imply that Laird lost all hope for South Vietnam, though. While he became increasingly pessimistic about South Vietnam’s survival, he

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37 Melvin R. Laird, “Foreign Policy as Campaign Issue,” folder “Campaign Statements, 1962,” Box A4, LP.
38 Laird, A House Divided, 105-106.
still believed America’s ally could survive with vigorous help. Laird’s speeches in 1963 and 1964 reflected this mindset as he frequently encouraged President Kennedy and later President Lyndon B. Johnson to escalate the war. This position never implied the commitment of large numbers of U.S. ground forces. Laird believed in his strategy of initiative, and so his prescription for the Vietnam impasse was the use of American air and naval power— the commitment of U.S. troops would only play to the enemy’s strengths. After the Laotian settlement, the job did not become impossible, only much more difficult.

In a 1963 article appearing in the Saturday Evening Post, Laird underscored this gloomy prognosis. Laird wrote that Kennedy’s “timid” foreign policy has “set the stage really for a future dilemma in which we will have to abandon all of Southeast Asia or fight a dirty war.” Believing that Third World conflicts were nothing more than “Soviet-dictated ping-pong games,” Laird urged policymakers to deter further aggression by threatening to escalate them on U.S. terms. Laird’s faith in America’s “preponderance of power” led him to the conclusion that communist forces would back down in the face of a credible U.S. threat. The United States had only to make its intentions known.39

As the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate in 1964, Representative Laird’s statements followed this reasoning but became more specific in their proposals. Speaking before Wisconsin Republicans on March 2, Laird asserted, “Either we abandon [South Vietnam], and therefore all Southeast Asia, to Communism; or we enlarge our own commitment of material and supplies, and carry the war to North

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Vietnam.” Laird clearly favored the latter alternative but he also made it known that he intended for foreign troops to do the fighting. In both his public statements and classified congressional briefings, Laird suggested the Johnson administration subsidize South Vietnamese forces with soldiers from other nations, particularly the Republic of China (Taiwan). Laird thought that American air and naval power when combined with local manpower would suffice. Hence, Laird wanted to escalate the conflict and invade North Vietnam, but he did not want an Americanization of the ground war in Southeast Asia.

Election year politics and Laird’s hawkish rhetoric created a firestorm at the White House in early June. In a May 31 radio interview, Laird stated, “The administration plans to prepare to move into North Viet Nam….I have felt [for some time] that we should be prepared to move into North Viet Nam….And I am happy to say that the administration takes the same position.” Although the Johnson administration was considering that contingency, President Johnson had no desire to appear in league with a hawkish Republican. Laird’s June 1 congressional speech criticizing the administration’s foreign policy further angered the president. In it, Laird railed against what he considered the five false premises guiding White House policymakers: that America “can negotiate in good faith with communists,” prevent further escalation by minimizing the use of military force, rely almost solely on political and economic means to stop communist aggression, use world opinion to deter such assaults, and deal with

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Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia individually. Laird then urged Johnson to discard these false premises and change his Southeast Asian policies.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy’s assurances that Laird was “too small” to worry about, Laird’s statements had upset LBJ.\textsuperscript{44} On June 2, the president implicitly addressed Laird’s accusations in a morning news conference. When asked if the administration was planning to expand the war into North Vietnam, President Johnson replied, “I know of no plans that have been made to that effect.” Rather than directly deal with what Laird saw as false premises, Johnson pronounced what he considered the four basic themes governing U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Johnson declared, “America keeps her word,” its overall goal is peace, his administration did see Vietnam as part of the larger struggle for freedom, and U.S. policymakers were dealing with Southeast Asia as a whole.\textsuperscript{45}

Even after the presidential press conference, LBJ continued to agonize over Laird’s statements and his responses to them. In a lengthy discussion with McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Johnson sought affirmation for his statement that he knew of no plans to go into North Vietnam. The president told his advisors, “Now I think that’s a truthful statement. I haven’t got any plans to move it in there….I might have them this afternoon. I might have them tomorrow. But I don’t have them

\textsuperscript{43} Melvin R. Laird Press Release, June 1, 1964, folder “Vietnam,” Box 10, Baroody Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.


before me. I haven’t made them now. [Laird] has no right to say that we’re going into North Vietnam.”

Credibility was the reason for all of this presidential angst. The Johnson administration had spent much of the spring secretly planning covert operations and air attacks against North Vietnam. Even as the president stated that he knew of no plans to attack North Vietnam, his top officials were in Honolulu considering that very course of action. Although the president had not made a definite decision, White House opinion was clearly moving in that direction. The president did not want to reveal these deliberations because of their potential volatility in the 1964 election as well as his fear that they would turn Congress’s attention away from civil rights reform. Nonetheless, Laird’s charges that President Johnson had “deliberately misled the American people” hinted at the political problems that awaited LBJ if he suddenly escalated the war. Many Republicans wanted Johnson to escalate the war but they would not hesitate to attack his credibility if he did so without congressional support.

In the months preceding the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Representative Laird was not the only Republican criticizing Johnson’s credibility on matters of foreign policy. In June, the Republican Citizens Committee’s Critical Issues Council published a report calling for a “sweeping revision of U.S. policy in the Far East.” The council encouraged the president to adopt a new strategy and then support it with a congressional resolution.

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46 Lyndon B. Johnson quoted in Beschloss, *Taking Charge*, 381-382; italics in original
The report then went on to recommend the “deployment of substantial [U.S.] armed forces near threatened areas,” something Laird was not willing to do.\(^{50}\)

Like the Critical Issues Council, many Republicans were adamant in their support for some form of escalation but they were less specific on what this entailed. Case in point was the 1964 Republican Platform, adopted that July. The platform reflected the conservative, Barry Goldwater wing of the party, and it promised a foreign policy whose goal was victory over communism. It also bore Laird’s imprint since he was chairman of the Republican Platform Committee, and as one journalist later put it, “Laird ram-rodde the Goldwater-endorsed platform” through the Republican National Convention.\(^{51}\) On Vietnam, Republicans promised to “move decisively to assure victory in South Vietnam” but remained vague on what this meant. Although Laird attributed this ambiguity to not knowing Johnson’s real intentions in Vietnam,\(^{52}\) it was likely a product of divisions within the party on Southeast Asian policy and a desire not to alienate voters with an overtly hawkish stance.\(^{53}\)

Indeed, before the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the majority of Americans, including many Republicans, were either against escalation or apathetic towards the crisis in South Vietnam. Although they received less attention than their Democratic counterparts, Republican doves were numerous and outspoken, and included Representative Eugene

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\(^{50}\) “News from Republican Citizens,” June 18, 1964, folder “Critical Issues Council,” Box 8, Baroody Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.


\(^{52}\) Melvin R. Laird, speech on “Commitment in Regard to Laos in 1961,” folder “Vietnam,” Box 10, Baroody Papers, Gerald R. Ford Library.

Siler (R-KY) who pledged to run for president and if elected immediately withdraw all American forces from Southeast Asia. Senator John Sherman Cooper (R-KY) was another notable Republican dove and he constantly urged Kennedy and later Johnson to negotiate a settlement in Vietnam. Furthermore, members of the press favoring de-escalation not only outnumbered their pro-escalation counterparts but were more vocal as well. For its part, Congress largely abdicated its role in shaping U.S. policy on Vietnam, instead offering uncritical support for whatever path LBJ chose.\textsuperscript{54} Meanwhile, the American people remained apathetic towards Vietnam. Historian Fredrik Logevall notes, “For most Americans, Vietnam remained a place and an issue of which they knew little and cared less.” Thus, Laird’s preference for immediate escalation was out of step with most of America.\textsuperscript{55}

Laird remained clear on his position, though. Victory required an immediate and dramatic escalation of the conflict using America’s strengths, and if Johnson refused to go the whole way, Laird believed the United States should quickly pull out of Southeast Asia. Otherwise, Laird feared the administration’s “halfway measures…will result in more American casualties and greater dangers to our national security than any other course of action we could pursue.” August events soon afforded President Johnson the opportunity to do one or the other.\textsuperscript{56}

On August 2, 1964, three North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the \textit{USS Maddox} off the North Vietnamese coast in the Gulf of Tonkin. The ships presumably

\textsuperscript{54} Mann, \textit{A Grand Delusion}, 306.
thought the Maddox had supported a recent South Vietnamese raid on the North and considered the attack a retaliatory measure. During the brief encounter, the Maddox sustained minor damage while easily damaging and driving off the torpedo boats. The incident alarmed policymakers in Washington, but they chose not retaliate. Instead, the Navy ordered the destroyer C. Turner Joy to reinforce the Maddox off the coast of North Vietnam.\(^{57}\)

Two days later the captains of the Maddox and Turner Joy thought that their ships were under assault. Rough seas and torrential rain made it difficult for sonar and radar operators to determine if the North Vietnamese were indeed attacking the ships. Nevertheless, the initial reports incensed the Johnson administration, and key policymakers ignored later reports from the Maddox that there had not been a second attack by North Vietnamese ships. Together, these encounters constitute the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident.\(^{58}\)

President Johnson quickly authorized limited U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam and then used the crisis as a pretext to propose a congressional resolution empowering him to expand the war. Unbeknownst to Congress, the Johnson administration had prepared a rough outline of the resolution several months earlier. Johnson had long been planning to bring military pressure against North Vietnam, and the Gulf of Tonkin affair provided the perfect political atmosphere for Johnson to widen the war without facing accusations of having previously misled the public. The resolution authorized the president “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed

\(^{57}\) Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 142.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 142-143.
attack against the forces of the United States” and “assist any member state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom.” Johnson believed the resolution would give him the necessary power to continue escalating the war until North Vietnam ceased its aggression against the South, but he had yet to decide on a specific course of action.

As congressional historian Robert Mann notes, the proposed Gulf of Tonkin Resolution soon “acquired the momentum of a runaway freight train.” Both houses of Congress quickly lined up to support the resolution. On August 7, it passed unanimously in the House of Representatives and by a margin of 88 to 2 in the Senate. Believing North Vietnam had brazenly attacked America twice in the Gulf of Tonkin, Congress and the public rallied around the flag and the resolution. Support for President Johnson and his Vietnam policies skyrocketed in the wake of the incident, but not everyone was in complete agreement with the president.

Although Laird firmly supported the resolution, he doubted that there had been an actual change in administration policy. Speaking before Congress on August 4 (prior to the disclosure of a second attack and the resolution’s proposal), Laird stated that the incident “was a deliberate attack on the United States of America,” and that America was again at an important crossroads. Laird continued, “We have to decide whether we have the will, whether we have the capacity, whether we have the determination to win this war in Southeast Asia. If we cannot now make this decision, then the time has come for

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60 Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 358.

us to pull out.” Even as Laird rose to support the resolution on August 7, he made his doubts known. Laird thought that Johnson’s policy of “measured response” was inadequate for the task. He urged the president to widen the war and “take whatever steps are necessary to win the war…within a reasonable period of time.” As public and congressional opinion decidedly supported the president during this period, it is important to note that Laird’s statements were consistent with his rhetoric before the Gulf of Tonkin: the United States should either promptly escalate the conflict using air and naval forces or withdraw from Southeast Asia.62

Autumn 1964 was a period of widespread support for LBJ’s policy of minimal escalation and “measured response.” Johnson’s handling of the Gulf of Tonkin incident neutralized Vietnam as a campaign issue. The Democratic president had demonstrated his resolve to defend Southeast Asia while maintaining his position as the peace candidate. Johnson told the American people,

I have had advice to load our planes with bombs and to drop them on certain areas that I think would enlarge the war and escalate the war, and result in our committing a good many American boys to fighting a war that I think ought to be fought by the boys of Asia to help protect their own land. And for that reason, I haven’t chosen to enlarge the war. Nor have I chosen to retreat and turn it over to the Communists.63

Johnson’s stance was ideal for winning an election, and he convinced most Americans that he would continue to prosecute the war without committing additional men and

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resources. All the while, President Johnson was secretly considering an escalation of the war after his electoral victory. Deception aside, LBJ won by a landside, receiving over sixty percent of the popular vote. Johnson had gained the political freedom to chart his own path in Vietnam.  

Indeed, numerous post-election polls indicated that most of the electorate remained ignorant and apathetic towards Vietnam. After the furor over the Gulf of Tonkin had subsided, Americans largely forgot about that conflict in a faraway land. When pollsters reminded them of the turmoil in Southeast Asia, few respondents had strong feelings for either deescalating or escalating the conflict. A University of Michigan poll showed that while 24 percent favored using U.S. forces, 32 percent opposed this step. Another study showed that 23 percent of Americans were against negotiations leading to a unified, neutral Vietnam but a slightly larger percentage were in favor of this outcome. A subsequent Harris poll demonstrated that approximately a quarter of the public wanted U.S. policymakers to “negotiate and get out” with another 45 percent wanting them to not exceed the present level of commitment. All of these numbers suggest that the bulk of the electorate was unsure of what course to take in Vietnam. Those segments of the population with strong feelings for or against escalation were relatively small in number and usually counterbalanced by those supporting the opposite course of action. As 1965 began, the average American looked to President Johnson for leadership on Vietnam and expected no wider war.

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64 Herring, America’s Longest War, 145; and Logevall, Choosing War, 242, 288.
65 Logevall, Choosing War and various polls quoted therein, 281-282, 288.
Even after the Republican Party’s devastating defeat in the 1964 presidential and congressional elections, Representative Laird stuck with his escalate or pull out of Vietnam dichotomy. In a February 4, 1965 speech, Laird stated his belief that most Americans did not support the president’s Vietnam policy, and he went on to propose the same policy he had been championing over the last few years. If America chose not to withdraw from Southeast Asia, Laird believed the United States should use its air and naval power against communist forces in the region, an alternative favored by only 18 percent of Americans. Laird then went on to make clear that his vision of escalation did not entail the use of U.S. ground troops. Although Laird never wavered in his stance on Vietnam, events in early 1965 changed the nature of America’s commitment to South Vietnam.

The February 7, 1965 National Liberation Front attack on the U.S. army base at Pleiku in the central highlands of South Vietnam provided the impetus for President Johnson’s escalation of the war. Just as the Gulf of Tonkin incident became the stated reason for Johnson’s proposal of the congressional resolution, Pleiku became the public justification for war plans the Johnson administration had agreed upon in December and January. Having concluded that they could not allow South Vietnam to fall without first taking military action, the Johnson administration chose to institute a gradual bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Pleiku was merely the pretext for this action.

Over two thirds of the American public supported Johnson’s “retaliatory” air strikes, but their support should not imply a desire for an expanded and Americanized

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66 Harris polls quoted in Logevall, Choosing War, 282.
68 Herring, America’s Longest War, 152-154.
war in South Vietnam. Logevall writes, “Among that huge mass of people who never wrote letters to the editor, a high level of detachment was common, even now, after American soldiers had been attacked in their barracks and the president had ordered retaliation.” To the degree that it existed, the domestic consensus feared a major war was in the making but remained willing to continue to following the president’s lead.69

In the wake of Pleiku, a few leading Democrats expressed their concern over presidential policy but most kept their doubts to themselves. The fact that Senators Wayne Morse (D-OR) and Ernest Gruening (D-AK), the two senators who voted against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, criticized Johnson’s actions surprised no one, but the emergence of new critics did. Senators George McGovern (D-SD), Frank Church (D-ID), and Gaylord Nelson (D-WI) stood by President Johnson’s air strikes but openly objected to further escalation and encouraged the president to seek a negotiated settlement. These were not the only five senators opposed to Johnson’s escalation of the war, but the majority of congressional Democrats were unwilling to oppose the president publicly. As Johnson gradually Americanized the Vietnam War, Congress did little to challenge him.70

Meanwhile, hawkish Republican leaders intensified their pressure on LBJ to continue escalating the war. On February 17, bellicose Republicans in the House and Senate issued a statement endorsing Johnson’s recent air strikes against North Vietnam. In the joint statement, they also wrote, “If we have any difference with the President in this respect, it is the belief these measures might have been used more frequently since

69 Logevall, Choosing War, 360-361.
70 Mann, A Grand Delusion, 408-412, 414.
the Bay of Tonkin decision last August and an even stronger policy formulated in the meantime.” Above all else, these Republicans asserted that so long as North Vietnamese continue to infiltrate South Vietnam, “there can be no negotiations” on Vietnam.71

Representative Laird was one of the joint statement’s signatories, but even as President Johnson intensified the war, Laird’s doubts slowly began to override his faith in escalation. Laird’s pessimism again went back to the Laotian agreement. On March 1, Laird told Congress, “We are presently in an impossible situation in Vietnam for one very simple reason: Laos. The fate of South Vietnam was all but sealed on the day our Government joined in the declaration and protocol on the neutrality of Laos in 1962.” Laird went on to predict that the Vietnam War would end with a similar settlement and that the outcome would be communist domination of Southeast Asia. Implied in Laird’s statements was the assumption that should the United States decide to seek a negotiated settlement, then it had just as well pull out of South Vietnam.72

A little over a month later, President Johnson made a negotiated settlement the stated goal of the United States. In his April 7 “Peace Without Conquest” address at Johns Hopkins University, Johnson declared, “We will never be second in the search for such a peaceful settlement in Viet-Nam. . . . And we remain ready, with this purpose, for unconditional discussions.” The president conditioned such negotiations on the continued independence of South Vietnam, but his rhetoric was certain to ruffle the

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72 Melvin R. Laird, speech on “Republican Opportunity and Responsibility in 89th Congress,” March 1, 1965, folder “Credibility Gap- Johnson Administration and Public Misinformation,” Box A6, LP.
feathers of outspoken hawks. Yet, once again, Johnson’s true position was much closer to those who favored a wider war.\textsuperscript{73}

The purpose of the Johns Hopkins speech was to defuse domestic and international criticism of his escalation of the Vietnam War. In the months following Pleiku, the Johnson administration had launched a sustained air campaign against North Vietnam and deployed U.S. Marines to protect American air bases in South Vietnam. These highly visible actions alarmed people at home and abroad and left Johnson open to charges of warmongering. Johnson’s overtures for a peaceful settlement to the Vietnam conflict were merely a ruse to assuage their concerns and protect his flank on the political left. Privately, LBJ had already authorized U.S. ground forces to begin conducting offensive operations against the National Liberation Front. The president simultaneously approved the deployment of more soldiers to South Vietnam. In early 1965, the Johnson administration hoped these actions would stabilize the South Vietnamese government while bringing North Vietnam to the diplomatic table on America’s terms. Thus, President Johnson was no more committed to a negotiated settlement in April 1965 than hawkish congressional Republicans were.\textsuperscript{74}

Nevertheless, Melvin Laird saw Johnson’s pro-negotiation rhetoric as something the United States could never back down from, and so Laird concluded that the Johns Hopkins address reduced America’s options in Vietnam. Laird believed military victory was no longer an alternative, leaving only a negotiated settlement or withdrawal. In a


\textsuperscript{74} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 155, 157-160.
mid-June interview on NBC’s *The Today Show*, Laird stated, “You cannot talk about military victory in Vietnam when you already have established your policy objective as a negotiated settlement.”

Following this reasoning, Laird railed against the Johnson administration’s commitment of U.S. ground forces to Vietnam. Laird wrote, “If our objective is a negotiated settlement, it is time to use other means than the needless sacrifice of American lives to attain that objective.” Laird again urged the president to make effective use of air and naval power to coerce North Vietnam into a diplomatic settlement favorable to U.S. interests in the region. In a July 25 televised interview on ABC’s *Issues and Answers*, Laird stated his belief that an escalated air campaign against significant North Vietnamese targets and a naval blockade of North Vietnam would preclude the need for more U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam. Laird added,

I believe…this would be a means of demonstrating the will of the United States and then you would be in a better position to bring about the possibility of negotiations if that indeed is our aim. I believe as long as we are not using our power adequately and [the communist powers] realize that we are not, they can question the will of the United States to resist, and this does not stimulate them to bring them to the negotiating table.

In other words, President Johnson should expend American bombs rather than American lives to achieve a negotiated settlement.

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75 Congress, House, Representative Melvin Laird speech on “The Vietnam Situation” and reprint of *Today Show* transcript from June 17, 1965 interview, 89th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record*, 111, pt. 10 (June 21, 1965): 13651-13652
77 There were nearly 75,000 U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam at this time. See John S. Bowman, ed., *The Vietnam War: An Almanac* (New York: Bison Books, 1985), 121.
In sum, Representative Laird no longer saw military victory as possible, but he remained unwilling to abandon Southeast Asia to communism. His solution to the Vietnam problem remained the same: an escalated war that played to America’s strengths and avoided the commitment of U.S. troops. Laird could not understand why Johnson would commit thousands of men to achieve a negotiated settlement when a powerful air and naval offensive against North Vietnam could achieve the same end. Furthermore, having sacrificed the strategic advantage of controlling Laos, Democratic policymakers made it even more likely that a ground war in South Vietnam would become a protracted and bloody affair. Yet, like many other Americans, Laird could only express his “hope that we will not drift into a major land war in Southeast Asia.”

Melvin Laird was not the only Republican with this position. House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford (R-MI) similarly questioned “the logic of committing U.S. ground forces on a large scale to fight a war in Southeast Asia” and advocated a more effective use of U.S. air and sea power against North Vietnam. Senator Thruston Morton (R-KY) echoed this sentiment, stating that the United States should completely exhaust these means “before we commit a quarter of a million men on the ground over there.” Although these men were not representative of the entire Republican Party, they do show that even its most hawkish members were against committing U.S. troops to South Vietnam.

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79 Ibid., 17
81 ABC’s Issues and Answers, transcript from July 25, 1965 show, p. 16.
Their statements had no effect on the president, though. On July 28, 1965, President Johnson announced he was increasing America’s commitment of military forces from 75,000 to 125,000 with the possibility of expanding this number based on the situation in South Vietnam. As a *New York Times* editorial observed, there could be little doubt that “the United States is now fighting a land war in Asia;” “this is really war.”

Johnson’s Vietnam policy put Republican hawks, including Melvin Laird, in a difficult position. They had frequently pressed for a bipartisan foreign policy and a wider war. Although he had rejected their plans for escalation, the president seemed to have the same overall objective: the preservation of a non-communist South Vietnam. They could either support the president’s Americanization of the conflict or appear to have forsaken their anticommunism. Republican leadership chose the former alternative but they did not do so enthusiastically.

Representative Laird typified this sentiment. When asked, “At what point in commitment of men to Vietnam, do you think the Republican Party will say, we can no longer support [the president’s policy]?” Laird avoided giving a clear answer. Laird told the reporter that giving Johnson a timetable would cause Soviet and Chinese communists to miscalculate America’s will “to defend freedom throughout the world.” Therefore, Laird, like many other Republican leaders, supported the Johnson administration’s

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84 Mann, *A Grand Delusion*, 463.
Americanization of the war, but as Laird often publicly pointed out, “Support for a policy is not necessarily synonymous with enthusiastic approval of that policy.”

One could say much the same thing about the American people’s support for the war’s expansion in 1965. In a September Gallup Poll, fifty-eight percent of those surveyed registered their approval of the “Johnson administration’s handling of the situation in Vietnam.” A subsequent poll indicated sixty-four percent of Americans thought the United States did the right thing in involving its military forces in Southeast Asia. Undoubtedly, some of these men and women were enthusiastic supporters of America’s new role in Vietnam, but given how little attention Americans previously gave Vietnam, it is doubtful that the commitment of U.S. troops instantly endeared them to the defense of South Vietnam. Rather, as author Thomas Powers notes, the war “remained strangely distant, a far-away struggle on the periphery of American life. Business boomed. Few families had lost sons, and there was no rationing. The killing all took place on television…and the government insisted there was money enough for both guns and butter.” Only ten percent of Americans believed the Vietnam War would be a long conflict. A much larger number simply chose to trust their president to do the right thing, telling themselves that it would all be over soon anyway.

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Melvin Laird harbored no illusions of a quick end to the conflict, and in late 1965 and early 1966, he began calling for a U.S. declaration of war against North Vietnam. Laird felt that Johnson’s Americanization of the war exceeded the mandate given by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Although he disagreed with those who charged that LBJ was conducting an illegal war, Laird argued America’s altered role in South Vietnam necessitated a congressional declaration of war or at least a resolution authorizing this change. Should Congress reassert its constitutional authority over the executive, Laird demanded the president provide Congress with a full disclosure of the facts on Vietnam. Laird also reasoned that a declaration of war would convince the enemy to abide by international law on prisoners of war, guaranteeing the safety of captured American aviators and soldiers. President Johnson ignored calls for a declaration of war, but Representative Laird’s efforts led Wisconsin’s Democratic Party chair to label him “head of the war hawks.”

This title did not accurately describe Laird’s position on Vietnam in 1966, though. After Democrats made such accusations, Laird responded, “I am keeping the Republicans quiet on the issue [of an expanded war]. It is ridiculous to talk about military victory in Southeast Asia. I favor peace by negotiations.” The Johnson administration had chosen a ground war, and Laird, like most of Congress, felt politically compelled to finance American troops already in the field. Even so, Laird’s oft-stated hawk/dove

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dichotomy of escalating the war or pulling out dissolved in 1966. After 1965, Laird stopped calling for an escalated air and naval campaign. He recognized that President Johnson had rejected his strategy of initiative and had opted for a ground war instead. The Johns Hopkins speech had made a negotiated settlement America’s primary goal, and even as Laird began to support negotiations, he remained committed to the preservation of the Republic of Vietnam. Thus, as the war wore on, Laird looked increasingly moderate, but he did not slacken his commitment to South Vietnam.

Having failed to persuade the president to adopt his tactics, Melvin Laird spent much of the year pressuring the Johnson administration to avoid an overall objective that permitted a coalition government that included communists in South Vietnam. On March 1, 1966, Laird told Congress, “If a coalition government including Communist representation is acceptable to the President- as it is to many influential members of his party, all the fighting in South Vietnam- all the sacrifices- all the bloodshed- make no sense, and they should be no further prolonged.” It is important to note that Laird was not against communists who came to power via free elections, but he believed it would be several years before South Vietnam could hold meaningful elections. Instead, Laird was against a negotiated settlement that gave South Vietnamese communists a stake in a coalition government before free elections occurred.⁹¹

The conclusions of the October 1966 Manila Conference between America and its allies in Vietnam would try Laird’s optimism just as the Laotian settlement and Johns

Hopkins speech had done before it. The conference’s key agreement was that there would be a complete withdrawal of allied forces if North Vietnamese soldiers also left South Vietnam. Moreover, the allies promised to leave within six months of the date North Vietnam agreed to these terms. The Manila Conference said nothing about the deactivation of Vietcong units within South Vietnam, though. Manila heightened Laird’s fear that the Johnson administration was amenable to a coalition government that included communists, but election year politics focused his attention away from Vietnam, leaving him to deal with this development in 1967.92

Nineteen sixty-six was a mid-term election year, and many political analysts wondered what role the war would play in the election. Despite their frequent criticisms of Democratic foreign policy in 1965, Republican leadership promised that they would not make Vietnam a prominent campaign issue in 1966.93 Instead, Melvin Laird charged the Johnson administration of making it an issue by deciding war policy “with an eye for domestic political considerations.” Nevertheless, Laird, like most other Republicans, pledged to keep Vietnam at the periphery of his political debates.94

As marginalized as Vietnam was in 1966, Republicans did make several open criticisms of the Democratic administration, the most notable being the Republican Conference’s White Paper on Vietnam. Entitled “The United States and the War in Vietnam,” this concise tract summarized America’s role in Vietnam since the Truman

94 Melvin R. Laird, interview with press, folder “Press Materials,” Box A12, LP.
administration. In it, Republicans argued that President Johnson chose to commit U.S. ground forces to Southeast Asia and that none of the treaties or obligations made by previous administrations required him to take this action. Referring to the document he helped create, Laird stated that it “sets forth the deception practiced by the Democratic spokesmen during the 1964 [and]….1966 election period[s] by withholding information concerning the costs of the war and the planned escalation of the war within the next year.” After chronicling what they considered Johnson’s numerous and egregious errors in Vietnam, the Republicans provided a bleak assessment of the situation. They concluded, “Administration policy has prevented Communist conquest of South Vietnam. However, peace or victory or stability there are still remote.” The White Paper failed to espouse any positive alternative to Johnson’s policies, perhaps indicating that a lack of answers was one reason why Republicans largely avoided the Vietnam issue in the 1966 election.

Democrats also made a conscientious decision to sidestep the subject of Vietnam. Given the growing antiwar faction within the party and President Johnson’s sagging popularity, few candidates wanted the electorate to link them with “Johnson’s War.” Indeed, with Republicans running an anti-Johnson themed campaign, many Democrats avoided any open association with the president. Not surprisingly, several congressional representatives in close races rebuffed presidential offers to help their campaigns with

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public appearances. Democratic candidates left President Johnson to defend his own Vietnam policies while they campaigned on other issues.\textsuperscript{97}

With nearly 400,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam and over 5,000 American soldiers killed in action that year alone,\textsuperscript{98} it is surprising that the public did not make the Vietnam War the campaign issue. Moreover, Americans frequently told Gallup pollsters that Vietnam was the most important problem facing the United States.\textsuperscript{99} Given its virtual absence from the election, journalist James Reston rightfully asked, “What happened to the Vietnam issue?”\textsuperscript{100}

Democrats and Republicans were able to avoid Vietnam because of the peripheral nature of the conflict and the presence of other problems that directly confronted their constituencies. In 1966, Americans witnessed an increasing amount of social and racial unrest within their country as well as rising inflation. With more immediate problems to point to, politicians could easily avoid entangling themselves in the emerging debate over Vietnam. After the election, Republicans won forty-seven seats in the House and three in the Senate but they failed to gain majority control of either. Yet, because Vietnam remained on the backburner throughout the election, the results were in no way a referendum on the war.

The Vietnam War did not become a real crisis for most Americans until 1967. Approximately 180 U.S. soldiers returned home in body bags every week, nearly double

\textsuperscript{98} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 182, 267.
\textsuperscript{99} See in \textit{The Gallup Poll}, 2009, 2026, 2034.
the 1966 rate. The war intensified the culture war going on within America by providing a very public and controversial issue for young and old to disagree. Millions of Americans began turning against the war, and thousands of them began participating in anti-war demonstrations. In turn, this social turmoil combined with rising inflation and the apparent stalemate in the ground war to cause even more Americans to slacken their support for the war. Historian Thomas Powers writes, “If the war meant chaos at home, they wanted the war to end.” Faith in their president and optimism for a quick, relatively bloodless conflict had waned. Nineteen sixty-seven was a year of steadily increasing doubts about U.S. prospects in South Vietnam.

Although the Laotian settlement, President Johnson’s Johns Hopkins speech, and the Manila Communiqué had increased his own doubts, Representative Laird remained committed to South Vietnam. In a February letter to President Johnson, Laird noted the American people’s deep concern over the war but wrote, “They are willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary in time of war to insure honorable success for their country’s cause.” Laird urged Johnson to be frank with the public about his policies and goals in Vietnam. Laird also pleaded with the president to avoid a negotiated settlement that would leave the communist insurgency intact in South Vietnam, lest that country suffer the same fate as Laos.

In both the letter and in an address before Congress, Laird suggested that the United States begin using trade agreements as weapons in the Vietnam War. Laird argued, “The Soviet Union holds the key to peace in Vietnam because it and its East

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101 Herring, America’s Longest War, 267.
102 Wells, The War Within, 182; and Powers, The War at Home, 200, 238.
103 Melvin R. Laird, letter to President Johnson, folder “Misc.,” Box D1, LP, p. 1,3,4.
European satellites are now providing more than 80 percent of the strategic war materials furnished to North Vietnam.” Therefore, he supported a bill that would withhold economic, educational, and cultural agreements with certain communist nations until they agreed to stop supporting wars of national liberation in Vietnam and elsewhere. Laird then went on to criticize the Johnson administration for escalating the air campaign against North Vietnam while refusing to use trade as a weapon of war. With American men already in harm’s way, Laird saw Johnson as foolish for not utilizing every available means to shorten the war’s duration. Although Laird thought such tactics were important, he spent a much greater portion of 1967 urging the Johnson administration to renounce the Manila agreement.104

After the 1966 election, Laird had time to sharpen his criticisms of the Manila Communiqué. In speeches across the country and before Congress, Laird argued that it represented a fundamental change in U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia. In his eyes, the Manila agreement dropped America’s pledge to safeguard a non-communist South Vietnam after the departure of American forces. With U.S. soldiers doing the bulk of the fighting and dying in Vietnam, Laird held out little hope that South Vietnam could survive America’s exit, even with the withdrawal of North Vietnamese regulars. Laird stated, “I cannot believe that the South Vietnamese are ready today, or will be ready within the short space of a year or so, to act successfully against a rejuvenated Vietcong unhampered by American involvement in support of the South Vietnamese.” Given Manila’s long-term implications for U.S. goals in Southeast Asia, Laird surmised, “I see

only two realistic choices facing us today: reaffirm our original objective and proceed from there; or pull out of Vietnam before another drop of American blood is needlessly spilled.”

Within Representative Laird’s pronouncements against Manila, one can see the nascent logic behind Vietnamization. Laird felt that the war had become almost entirely an American conflict, and that the South Vietnamese government was still unable to defend itself from the Vietcong. Furthermore, Laird thought that the opportunity to employ America’s full air and naval power against North Vietnam had passed and that serious negotiations were only a matter of time. Reflecting on this grim situation in July 1967, Laird declared, “I am neither a ‘hawk’ nor a ‘dove’ on Vietnam but rather a pessimist.” Despite his pessimism, Laird remained committed to preserving a non-communist South Vietnam but he was uncertain how he could achieve this goal given Manila and the Democratic administration’s unwillingness to consult Congress on foreign policy. Although he had not yet arrived at this conclusion in his own mind, the way Laird framed the dilemma pointed to a possible solution: prepare South Vietnamese forces to handle the communist insurgency and then allow the mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces. In the interim, a clearly stated, positive objective in Vietnam would buoy domestic support for the war. To Laird, North Vietnam’s communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, would be a fool not to accept the Manila agreement, and so in 1967, Laird did not follow his thoughts to their logical conclusion.

Yet, as North Vietnam consistently rejected the Manila Communiqué and as Republicans returned to the White House, Laird would get the opportunity to develop these early Vietnamization ideas.\textsuperscript{106}

In autumn 1967, Representative Laird began looking forward to the 1968 election. As one contemporary political commentator noted, the Republican stance on Vietnam was not predetermined and that a public backlash against the war could push the party to a dovish platform.\textsuperscript{107} Laird certainly thought that campaigning as the peace party was the surest ticket to electoral victory and he prepared a Republican response should the Democrats try to broker a peace settlement during the election year. So long as the Republican candidate appeared more dovish than the Democrats on the war, Laird felt that the GOP had a good chance of winning the election.\textsuperscript{108}

Republican political strategists were not the only ones worrying about the public’s growing antagonism towards the war. Fearing that domestic opinion could jeopardize America’s mission in Vietnam, President Johnson launched a fall propaganda campaign to silence his critics and increase popular support for the war. Johnson ordered General William Westmoreland, head of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), home to help assure Americans that the United States was winning the Vietnam War. Johnson also enlisted other top officials and politicians in his public relations campaign. Their efforts briefly convinced many Americans that there was light at the end of the

\textsuperscript{106} Laird, “Proposal for Reciprocal Graduated Deescalation of the War in Vietnam,” 19052-19053
tunnel, a perception the Tet Offensive shattered just two months later. Thus, 1967 ended with Americans anticipating an end to the war and Laird looking for a way to preserve the Republic of Vietnam.109

After years of being rebuffed by Democratic administrations, Laird had abandoned his call for immediate and decisive air/naval escalation but he had not given up on South Vietnam. By December 31, 1967, Melvin Laird was much more pessimistic than the young Wisconsin congressman who wrote A House Divided in 1962. The Laotian settlement, the flawed Americanization of the war, President Johnson’s apparent willingness to settle for a coalition government, and the possibility of the outright abandonment of South Vietnam to the Vietcong, all shook Representative Laird’s faith in a positive outcome to the Vietnam War. Yet, he was not ready to join those calling for an immediate, unilateral U.S. withdrawal. Nineteen sixty-eight was an election year, and perhaps something could still be done to save the Republic of Vietnam from communism.

2. The Establishment on the Defensive: The Tet Offensive, Domestic Unrest, and the 1968 Election

“In a very real sense, this society of ours seems to be coming apart.”

~ Melvin Laird, July 1968

Representative Melvin Laird began 1968 with the firm conviction that the United States should preserve a noncommunist South Vietnam, even though he did not know how he would accomplish this objective. Yet, events in 1968 would make saving South Vietnam even more difficult. The January Tet Offensive shook America’s remaining faith in the war effort while the war itself radicalized protests within America. As violent demonstrations erupted throughout the country, the two dominant political parties and George Wallace’s American Independent Party battled for the White House. Together, the Tet Offensive, domestic unrest, and the presidential election worked in such a way as to make the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces a necessary part of Laird’s Vietnamization plan.

According to military historian James H. Willbanks, “The Tet Offensive of 1968 was the pivotal event of the long Vietnam War.”110 This assault sparked a reevaluation of U.S.-Vietnam strategy that chose disengagement over continued escalation and tilted the balance of American opinion in favor of the doves. In terms of Vietnamization, this new strategy prepared the government bureaucracy for an American withdrawal from Vietnam while the latter intensified domestic pressure to end the war.

Historian Walter LaFeber has described 1968 as the year that a social hurricane “struck American society with greater fury than any destructive force since the Civil War.”111 America’s youth seemed to be throwing off their elders’ institutions as they joined antiwar and counterculture movements. Across the country, racial riots destroyed whole sections of America’s cities and students violently shut down university campuses. Even the political process itself appeared threatened by radical protestors outside the Democratic National Convention. While these riots and protests were the culmination of trends that preceded 1968, the year’s violence forced policymakers to reevaluate the war’s domestic costs.

This hurricane of social turmoil helped create a positive policy to end the Vietnam War, though. In 1968, Laird remained virtually silent on Vietnam, but the nation’s domestic unrest had a profound impact on what would become his Vietnamization program. These events convinced him that any plan to preserve South Vietnam would first have to guarantee the survival of the United States. Indeed, Laird’s rationale for the unilateral withdrawal aspect of Vietnamization emerged from this domestic unrest as he searched for a way to win both the war at home and the war in Indochina. By deescalating the war, Laird hoped to reduce tensions within America.

Finally, the presidential election determined who would set America’s Vietnam policy. Republican candidate Richard Nixon had campaigned on a vague policy of de-Americanization in Vietnam, and his election would give Laird the opportunity to develop and implement Vietnamization. Whereas the Johnson administration had linked

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an American phase out with the simultaneous withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam, Nixon’s plan allowed U.S. forces to withdraw as South Vietnam’s military got stronger. His de-Americanization gave U.S. planners a policy that they could implement regardless of North Vietnam’s actions, but a skilled politician could also use it to reduce U.S. troop numbers to a level acceptable to the American public. In campaign stops across the country, Nixon declared that he would end the war honorably. Whether by Nixon’s designs or not, this publicity introduced and inculcated the idea of Vietnamization to the American public. His narrow victory over his Democratic challenger, Hubert Humphrey, gave Nixon the opportunity to implement this policy, and his appointed Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, set out to turn Vietnamization into a workable program.

In sum, 1968 set the stage for Melvin Laird’s formal development of Vietnamization in 1969. The Tet Offensive, social turmoil, and election-year rhetoric all encouraged Laird to adopt a policy that allowed the United States to minimize its role in the Vietnamese ground war. By the year’s end, Laird had coupled gradual, unilateral withdrawal with his commitment to building up the South Vietnamese military. Thus, the two fundamental aspects of Vietnamization finally came together in 1968.

The first of the year’s major events was the beginning of the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front’s Tet Offensive, which consisted of two phases. The first began in late 1967 and consisted of major attacks in the remote areas of South Vietnam. The purpose of these attacks was to lure American and South Vietnamese military forces
away from urban centers. This tactic proved successful, and preparations began for the second phase: an all out assault to capture and hold South Vietnamese cities. Hanoi hoped that this offensive would incite a popular uprising against the South Vietnamese government and shatter America’s faith in achieving any meaningful victory.\textsuperscript{112}

Beginning on January 30, 1968 and lasting for several weeks, the second stage struck nearly every South Vietnamese urban center. Hanoi chose to initiate this military campaign at the start of the lunar new year, or Tet, celebrations. Previously, the warring armies had observed a temporary ceasefire during this festive period, and South Vietnamese and American military leaders assumed 1968 would be the same. With American forces deployed to rural areas after the 1967 attacks and Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) soldiers returning home to visit their families during Tet, the second offensive caught both parties off guard. NLF and North Vietnamese forces seemed to strike practically every city, district capital, and hamlet at once. In the South Vietnamese capital of Saigon, NLF guerrillas even managed to breach the American embassy compound. In a scene that typified the pandemonium, American journalists captured images of U.S. personnel firing wildly into the compound. Like the Tet Offensive in general, the embassy raid was short lived. ARVN and U.S. forces quickly reorganized and began repulsing the nationwide assault. Nevertheless, the unexpected and dramatic nature of the Tet Offensive had left its imprint on American policymakers.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{112} Herring, America’s Longest War, 226-228.
\textsuperscript{113} Willbanks, The Tet Offensive, 66-67; and Herring, America’s Longest War, 225, 228-229.
The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Earle Wheeler, saw the Tet Offensive as an opportunity to pressure President Johnson into calling up the national military reserves. Johnson had avoided utilizing the National Guard because he feared that this action would signify to the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and the American public that Vietnam was more than a limited conflict. The resulting international and domestic backlash could escalate the war in Vietnam and intensify opposition at home. Conversely, General Wheeler believed that the Vietnam War had depleted America’s strategic reserve of military personnel, leaving the United States unable to respond adequately to possible conflicts in other parts of the world. Therefore, Wheeler urged America’s top leader in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, to give the president a negative assessment of the post-Tet situation in Vietnam along with a request for additional troops. Westmoreland acceded to this suggestion because he believed that with more troops he could build on U.S. and ARVN military victories and cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail by expanding the war into Laos and Cambodia. Wheeler also provided Johnson with his own bleak report while forwarding Westmoreland’s request for an additional 206,000 U.S. troops, which would bring the total troop commitment to over 730,000. Historian George Herring writes, “By presenting a gloomy assessment [Wheeler] hoped to stampede the administration into providing the troops to rebuild a depleted strategic reserve and meet any contingency in Vietnam.”114 Wheeler had miscalculated, though. His efforts instead initiated a bureaucratic stampede to rethink the level of America’s commitment to the Republic of South Vietnam.115

114 Herring, America’s Longest War, 235.
115 Willbanks, The Tet Offensive, 70-72.
As one high-ranking official recalled, Westmoreland’s appeal for 206,000 more troops set off a firestorm amongst U.S. policymakers. While individual members of the Johnson administration, such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, had expressed concern over the war’s direction in 1967, Tet awakened the foreign policy establishment and initiated a revaluation of the war. Before this tumultuous period in early 1968, most Washington officials had never seriously considered disengagement or unilateral withdrawal from the war. Afterwards, President Johnson and U.S. policymakers agreed to cap the war’s escalation.

President Johnson’s newly appointed Secretary of Defense, Clark Clifford, both epitomized and precipitated this transformation. As late as the fall of 1967, Clifford had been a leading hawk and staunch supporter of the Vietnam War. Just as they had for many other Americans, the Tet Offensive and Westmoreland’s troop request eroded his faith in the war effort. Shortly thereafter, Clifford set out to reevaluate U.S. policy and change Lyndon Johnson’s views on the war.

On February 28, LBJ authorized a task force to examine the military, economic, and political consequences of a possible troop increase as well as alternatives to Westmoreland’s proposal. Johnson named Clifford as the group’s chair, and the proceedings had an enormous impact on Clifford. Clifford’s task force on Vietnam heard numerous intelligence assessments discrediting the optimistic 1967 pronouncements. CIA reports indicated that North Vietnam and its NLF allies could match an increase in the number of American soldiers. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Warnke, who would later help Melvin Laird develop

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Vietnamization, had long opposed the war and saw it as his duty to convert Clifford from a hawk to a dove.\textsuperscript{117} Warnke instructed his office to prepare papers for the task force that reflected his own pessimistic assessment of the war. These studies reported that the 1967-68 offensives had destroyed South Vietnamese efforts to control the countryside. Additionally, their reports predicted a public backlash to a troop increase and suggested the United States completely reevaluate its Vietnam strategy. All of these reports indicated to Clifford that America was mired in a deadly stalemate. On March 4, the Vietnam task force recommended the president immediately deploy an additional 22,000 U.S. troops to South Vietnam but delay further increases until policymakers had conducted a more thorough evaluation of the war.\textsuperscript{118}

Although the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland’s troop request, and Warnke’s reports had convinced Clifford that the United States “should level off our involvement [in Vietnam], and to work toward gradual disengagement,” he still had to convince President Johnson that this was the right course to take.\textsuperscript{119} This objective would not be easy. Clifford was up against not only Johnson’s desire to see the conflict through but also the commitment of key advisors to a decisive victory against communism. As American and South Vietnamese forces repulsed the Tet Offensive, National Security Advisor Walt Rostow pressed LBJ to follow up on this military success and therefore supported a significant increase of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam. Rostow believed that Tet represented a final, desperate push by the communists to end the war and that Johnson should press on

\textsuperscript{117} Wells, The War Within, 245.
\textsuperscript{119} Clark Clifford quoted in Schmitz, The Tet Offensive, 132.
towards victory. Anticipating this resistance, Secretary of Defense Clifford skillfully used the Wise Men President Johnson trusted for advice to minimize the influence of the remaining hawks.\textsuperscript{120}

The Wise Men represented the founding fathers of the Cold War foreign policy establishment and included men like former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and former National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy. The Wise Men had played a key role in encouraging the Americanization of the war in 1965 and they stuck to this line in a November 1967 meeting with LBJ. After hearing General Wheeler’s briefing at this meeting, Acheson, the bellwether of the group, declared “I got the impression this is a matter we can and will win…We certainly should not get out of Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{121} With the possible exception of the elderly diplomat Averell Harriman who was hoping to head any negotiating effort, the Wise Men were unanimous in their support for the war.\textsuperscript{122} LBJ undoubtedly received no small amount of comfort from this meeting, and so he proceeded to champion the war louder than ever.

Sensing that the Wise Men had changed their opinions on the war after Tet, Clifford recognized their ability to shape the president’s attitude on the war, and so he requested a meeting of the Wise Men.\textsuperscript{123} In this fateful March 26 meeting, pessimism replaced the November optimism. Acheson succinctly summarized the new majority view when he said, “The issue is can we do what we are trying to do in Vietnam. I do not

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{120} Schmitz, \textit{The Tet Offensive}, 137-138.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} Clifford, \textit{Counsel to the President}, 455.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Herbert Y Schandler, \textit{Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam: The Unmaking of a President} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 255.
\end{itemize}
think we can.”  

It was not the military situation in Vietnam that led them to recommend disengagement, but the political situation in the United States. Earlier in this fateful meeting, several of the Wise Men noted that the South Vietnamese government and United States were running out of time to win the war, a constraint Acheson blamed on “reactions in this country.” This position was not unanimous, though. As LBJ saw it, “six advisers favored some form of disengagement, one was in between, and four were opposed.” Nonetheless, this meeting represented America’s first real step towards disengagement as it weakened the president’s resolve and led to a serious reevaluation of America’s Vietnam policies.

One should note that disengagement did not mean withdrawal. Rather, most of the Wise Men were against unilateral withdrawal and feared public opinion could push the country in that direction. Future Secretary of State Cyrus Vance summed up this sentiment when he stated, “Unless we do something quick, the mood in this country may lead us to withdrawal.” Instead of withdrawal, disengagement meant possibly halting the bombing campaign against North Vietnam and changing the ground strategy in South Vietnam so that America might find a way out of the morass. Debates on the role of a bombing pause in negotiations, not troops, occupied much of the administration’s discussions, and even then, LBJ did not halt the bombing campaign against North

Vietnam until October 31. In terms of capping the ground war, Clifford, more than anyone, else was responsible for the troop ceiling, and he accomplished this by independently establishing the limit of 549,500 troops in press conferences. The Johnson administration never seriously considered unilateral withdrawal in the plans and policy debates that followed the March meeting, but the steps it took toward disengagement paved the road for the Nixon administration’s Vietnamization policy.

Two themes characterized the disengagement planning that emerged in 1968: the buildup of ARVN forces and preparations for a mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and American troops from South Vietnam. General Westmoreland had initiated a plan to gradually modernize and enlarge the South Vietnamese military in 1967, but the Tet Offensive catalyzed this process. The result was a two-year plan that would accomplish this goal in half the time. Building on the two-year plan, the May Plan (named for the month it was developed) went beyond modernization by planning for the withdrawal of U.S. forces. It proposed to make the Republic of Vietnam fully capable of dealing with the NLF insurgency without the aid of U.S. ground troops by 1973. The May Plan assumed the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and U.S. soldiers but according to the plan, America would maintain a residual force of around 20,000 U.S. military personnel with most of them belonging to the Air Force. Throughout the latter half of 1968, Westmoreland’s replacement, General Creighton Abrams, implemented and accelerated this modernization planning. Abrams hoped to complete the May Plan by

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1971, and his active approach to strengthening South Vietnam would prove invaluable to Melvin Laird in 1969.\textsuperscript{131}

As U.S. policymakers prepared these plans, they also began planning for America’s exit from South Vietnam. Paul Warnke was the principal architect of what became Termination or T-Day planning. After LBJ announced at the 1966 Manila Conference that the United States would accept the simultaneous withdrawal of North Vietnamese and U.S. forces, policymakers assumed Hanoi would eventually accept these terms. Therefore, Warnke’s T-Day scenario planned for a Manila-like settlement where North Vietnamese regulars and U.S. ground troops would begin an immediate mutual withdrawal after the two countries reached a cease-fire agreement. Like the rest of the Johnson administration’s planning, Warnke’s T-Day formulations rejected unilateral withdrawal from the outset. Furthermore, T-Day planning included various timetables for mutual withdrawal, but none of them correlated with the May Plan. Indeed, in 1968, Washington policymakers failed to relate modernization plans with troop withdrawals. Like Laird the year before, General Abrams observed that a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces after a ceasefire would undermine U.S. plans to strengthen ARVN forces. Abrams and Laird maintained that the South Vietnamese military needed several more years to become self-sufficient, and by preparing for a six-month withdrawal, T-Day planning did not account for this reality. Instead, Laird would adopt a policy of unilateral

withdrawal and tie it to the modernization program, but the T-Day proposal at least provided the framework for withdrawing U.S. troops.\textsuperscript{132}

The Tet Offensive began America’s disengagement from the war. Before Tet, President Johnson’s escalation of the war had only begun to taper off. Afterwards, Secretary of Defense Clifford and other Washington policymakers made a concerted effort to cap the escalation. Tet initiated a reappraisal of the war that in turn led to the development of various plans to disengage American forces from South Vietnam. While none of them prepared for a unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops, they represented the precursors of Laird’s Vietnamization.

The public reaction to the Tet Offensive and 1968’s social turmoil created the impetus for the unilateral withdrawal aspect of Vietnamization. After Johnson and Westmoreland’s late 1967 Progress Campaign, the unexpected military assault shattered government credibility and eroded the public’s faith in any meaningful victory. Meanwhile, social movements within the United States became increasingly radical and violent as students took over college campuses and racial riots besieged several cities. Although these protests were the culmination of trends that preceded 1968, policymakers interpreted them as a dangerous departure from the past that could destroy America from within. To Vietnamization’s architect, Melvin Laird, “American society seemed to be

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 302-304.
coming apart." Laird saw troop withdrawals as a means to alleviate this tension, and 1968’s turbulent events helped lead him to this conclusion.

The Tet Offensive shook the American people just as it had the Washington bureaucracy. Throughout most of 1967, a clear majority of Americans thought that either the United States was standing still or losing ground in Vietnam, but after Johnson’s efforts to shore up support, 50 percent of Americans believed the United States was making progress in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive erased these gains while increasing the number of skeptics. Although the president of the Gallup Poll, George Gallup, saw it as “a dramatic turning point in attitudes toward the war,” the Tet Offensive simply prompted the return of American pessimism on a much larger scale than it had been in 1967. Gallup noted that the North Vietnamese and NLF offensive “contributed to a massive swing to the ‘dove’ side” among Americans and that hawkish positions never regained their appeal. After Tet, only 18 percent of Americans believed their country was making progress in Vietnam. Seventy-two percent said the United States and its allies were either losing ground or standing still in Vietnam (up from 56 percent in July 1967 and 41 percent after the Progress Campaign). Despite claims that Tet represented a military victory for anticommunist forces, a March Harris poll indicated that 60 percent of Americans “regarded the Tet Offensive as a defeat of U.S. objectives in Vietnam.” North Vietnam’s top general, Vo Nguyen Giap, summed up America’s response quite well,

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133 Melvin Laird quoted in Helen Laird, *A Mind of Her Own*, 357.
“Until Tet they had thought they could win the war, but now they knew that they could not.”

It was not the media’s portrayal of the Tet Offensive that turned a military victory into a psychological defeat, but the public’s realization of the credibility gap between the Johnson administration’s optimistic pronouncements and realities on the ground in South Vietnam. The raw footage and photographs did not need commentary to make an impact. The offensive reinforced the uncertainties and fears many Americans had about the war, and most thought back to the administration’s promised “light at the end of the tunnel.” General William Westmoreland’s request for 200,000 more troops only increased domestic skepticism of Tet being an allied success. Certainly, dubious Americans could relate to one young U.S. soldier’s statement on the war as he saw it from the beleaguered base at Khe Sanh. When asked by an NBC reporter, “Do you think [the war] is worth it?” he responded, “Yeah. [pause] I don’t know, they say we’re fighting for something. I don’t know.” The U.S. public had similar trouble resolving the question, but with the credibility gap exposed, an increasing number of them demanded an end to the conflict.

Of course, the antiwar movement had long preceded the Tet Offensive, but in 1968, it, like other social movements worldwide, underwent a fundamental change. The October 1967 Pentagon siege was one of the most visible antiwar rallies prior to 1968.

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136 Schmitz, The Tet Offensive, 162-163; and Willbanks, The Tet Offensive, 73.
More than 30,000 protestors marched to the Pentagon, but only a handful of them engaged in violent demonstrations.\textsuperscript{137} The following year saw the widespread abandonment of non-violent means. According to historian Jeremi Suri, “The year 1968 marked the point when demonstrators became militarized in parallel with the militarization of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia.” While groups like the Black Panther Party had celebrated the use of violence and promised to bring guerrilla-like warfare to America’s city streets before 1968, protesters increasingly saw violent acts as acceptable forms of protest. Furthermore, the polarization of society into radical and conservative groups, symbolized by antiwar student groups and George Wallace’s presidential campaign, ended the possibility of compromise and encouraged the carnival of violence that characterized 1968.\textsuperscript{138}

Elements within the civil rights movement provide one of the best examples of this trend. Even before Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination on 4 April 1968, the movement was in the process of abandoning nonviolent methods. As a result, peaceful demonstrations often turned into bloody riots. King’s violent death sparked race riots across the country, and this national episode marked the culmination of the race riots that had beset the country since the mid-1960s. The key difference in 1968 was that policymakers witnessed the looting and destruction firsthand. On April 5, Washington, D.C. experienced a siege that made the 1967 Pentagon protests look quite innocuous. Suri writes,

\begin{quote}
The rapid escalation of violence made the leaders of the “free world” fearful of walking or driving in their own streets. The U.S. government
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{137} Small, \textit{Antiwarrriors}, 77-79, 81.
had contained adversaries abroad with relative success, but it was now physically imperiled by enemies within. Each additional sidewalk lost to raging mobs represented another fallen domino, another further encroachment on the nation’s security by its own citizens.

The nation’s capital required large numbers of U.S. Army troops to quell the violence, reinforcing the siege mentality. Although the post-assassination riots were among the most dramatic, they were not the year’s last instance of domestic disorder.\textsuperscript{139}

Racial riots did not have a monopoly on violent protest, though. Outbreaks of campus unrest became a recurring event in 1968. Antiwar and antiestablishment causes ran together as students conducted often-violent protests at universities across the country. These acts were not the peaceful teach-ins of the mid-1960s but forceful demonstrations of revolutionary fervor. In a strike that would encourage militant students nationwide, students at Columbia occupied several buildings on campus for seven days, destroying and defacing university property. The brutality displayed by New York police officers as they cleared the buildings of protesters only incensed and radicalized more students. Although it was only a vocal minority of college students engaging in these protests, it appeared to Washington officials as if America’s youth had declared war on the establishment.\textsuperscript{140}

Nowhere was this phenomenon more apparent than outside the August 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois. Protestors began planning their demonstrations eight months in advance, but many in the movement worried about their safety and feared that violent antiwar demonstrations might discredit a dovish Democratic candidate should one materialize. With Mayor Richard Daley threatening to

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 183-185.
\textsuperscript{140} Small, \textit{Antiwarriors}, 87-88.
subdue any attempts to disrupt the convention, only five thousand protestors showed up in Chicago. Those radicals that did show up were committed to the cause and they worked to provoke a violent reaction from the Chicago police, who were all too eager to oblige them. After days of harassing the cops, the protestors got what they wanted. On August 28, protestors and police clashed with police brutality caught on camera. American novelist and eyewitness Norman Mailer wrote, “The police attacked with tear gas, with Mace, and with clubs, they attacked like a chain saw cutting into wood, the teeth of the saw the edge of their clubs.”

The protestors had successfully instigated a bloody spectacle, but it would be up to others to interpret its meaning.

The violence outside the Democratic National Convention only contributed to older Americans’ fears that society was coming unglued. Thanks in part to media coverage of the convention and Mayor Daley’s efforts to maintain order, the protestors had an impact disproportionate to their small numbers. Political historian Alan Brinkley writes, Chicago “created a sense among many Americans that their society was in the throes of a major, perhaps irrevocable breakdown; that the crisis was so grave, the condition of the nation so precarious that a genuine revolution might be impending.”

More than any other group, U.S. policymakers feared that this was the case. The Tet Offensive hastened the decline of domestic support for the Vietnam War. After Tet, many officials began wondering how long they could continue the war before Americans


143 Brinkley, “1968 and the Unraveling of Liberal America,” 227-228.
demanded an immediate end to it. Meanwhile, the war itself seemed to be alienating America’s youth from the establishment. In 1968, violent protests became the norm as passionate radicals rejected social mores and the government’s legitimacy. More importantly, high-ranking government officials exaggerated the size and scope of these movements, giving them strength disproportionate to their numbers. Therefore, more than one policymaker wondered that if the Vietnam War continued with no end in sight, who could say that 1969 would not be the year that the United States imploded?144

In 1969, Melvin Laird’s memory of this domestic turmoil became the impetus for the unilateral withdrawal component of Vietnamization. After a year of violent protests, society seemed ready to explode, and Laird believed his primary job as Secretary of Defense was to defuse the ticking time bomb of public opinion. By deescalating the conflict in Southeast Asia, he hoped to reduce tensions at home. Thus, 1968’s social context set the course for America’s eventual exit strategy from Vietnam.145

As America’s Vietnam policy evolved behind the scenes and public unrest occupied the headlines, the actual battle to control policy was going on. In the 1968 race for the White House, Vietnam played a central role in many of the debates within and among the political parties. After President Johnson’s surprise announcement on March 31 that he would not seek reelection, there was no candidate necessarily wedded to past policies. In sum, the presidential election placed America at a crossroads with the victor determining its path in Vietnam.

145 Interview of Melvin R. Laird by Matloff and Goldberg.
The political parties themselves were often unsure of how to approach the Vietnam issue, and the Republican Party often struggled with the war behind closed doors. The GOP candidates’ dilemma was that they needed to please the party’s sizable hawkish constituency while adopting a stance that could also appeal to an American audience fed up with the war. Attacking the Johnson administration’s policies proved easy and popular, but because of this dilemma, potential Republican candidates differed on how to end the war. An examination of two candidates, Nelson Rockefeller and Richard Nixon, reveals these divisions as well as the rhetorical antecedents of Vietnamization.\footnote{Johns, “Doves Among Hawks,” 604.}

Nelson Rockefeller had remained silent on the Vietnam War until after he announced his candidacy on April 30, 1968. Prior to his presidential campaign, Rockefeller had served as governor of New York since 1959, and his views often reflected those of the GOP’s liberal wing. On Vietnam, Rockefeller proposed building up ARVN forces while negotiating a mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and U.S. troops from South Vietnam. Rockefeller then went on to propose free elections in the Republic of Vietnam followed by the eventual reunification of the two Vietnamese countries. This position ran to the left of other Republican candidates, bolstering Republican doves. Rockefeller’s campaign never gained enough traction to upset the frontrunner, Richard Nixon, but his candidacy did articulate the Republican left’s views on Vietnam. After the disastrously conservative Goldwater campaign, the GOP worked to create a centrist platform, and Rockefeller’s ideas on withdrawal, free elections, and
the strengthening of the South Vietnamese military would help the committee write a platform that would unite the party and appeal to the American people.\textsuperscript{147}

Nixon’s reputation as a political loser made his campaign particularly vulnerable. Following his eight years as President Dwight Eisenhower’s vice president, Nixon lost the presidential election to John F. Kennedy in 1960 and then the 1962 California gubernatorial race to the Democratic incumbent, Edmund G. Brown Sr. After these setbacks, many Republicans lost faith in Nixon. Indeed, Rockefeller’s late candidacy emerged from Republican fears that Nixon could not win an election. In the intervening years between 1962 and 1968, Nixon campaigned on behalf of other Republicans and he played a large role in rebuilding the GOP after its overwhelming electoral defeat in 1964. Nixon’s efforts secured his status in the party and placed many politicians in his debt. Nixon skillfully used these political favors to advance his candidacy, but Vietnam remained an issue capable of derailing his nomination.\textsuperscript{148}

Because of his vulnerability, Nixon tried to remain as vague as possible on divisive subjects like Vietnam. Prior to 1968, Nixon was a pronounced hawk on Vietnam, but the deterioration of the war in South Vietnam and the changing U.S. political climate caused him to distance himself from this position. Like Melvin Laird, Nixon urged President Johnson in 1965 to use America’s air power rather than ground troops, but unlike Laird, Nixon continued to hold out for military victory. The Tet Offensive affected Nixon just as it had the Wise Men, tempering what would have otherwise been a hawkish campaign. After Tet, Nixon told his speechwriters, “I’ve come


\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 35-38.
to the conclusion that there’s no way to win the war. But we can’t say that, of course. In fact, we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage.”149 While Nixon’s hopes for a military victory would come and go, this statement reveals a man looking for alternative ways to “end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.”150 Nixon also wanted to avoid any position that would jeopardize his campaign, and after Tet, it became impossible to sell a hawkish war plan to the American people. Nixon found political victory in ambiguity, but several of his speeches revealed a trend towards disengagement.151

Nixon was intentionally vague about Vietnam in the 1968 campaign, yet there was one area where he was unequivocal: the need to train and build up South Vietnamese forces. While campaigning in New Hampshire, Nixon told a reporter, “Let me just sum it up in a word: For us to win simply a military victory over North Vietnam would not mean that we could get out. Because until the South Vietnamese are in a position that they can defend themselves,” the United States cannot guarantee South Vietnam’s survival.152 Therefore, in campaign stops across the country, Nixon asserted that “the nation’s objective should be to help the South Vietnamese fight the war and not fight it for them….If they do not assume the majority of the burden in their own defense, they cannot be saved.”153 Along with enlisting Soviet help in negotiations with North

151 Wainstock, The Turning Point, 38; and LaFeber, The Deadly Bet, 103.
Vietnam, the need to build up the South Vietnamese military was one of Nixon’s major thrusts in the first half of his campaign.

An emphasis on training was nothing new, though. In the 1964 presidential campaign, Lyndon Johnson declared that the United States was “not about to send American boys 9 [sic] or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves,” adding that the United States must continue to train and equip the South Vietnamese. Unlike Johnson though, Nixon was not trying to prevent another American ground war in Asia. Rather, in 1968 the United States was looking for a way out of one. Consequently, Nixon gradually hitched another element to the strengthening of South Vietnamese forces: American withdrawal.

By the start of the Republican National Convention on August 5, 1968, it was clear that Nixon had fused these two aspects of Vietnamization: the buildup of the South Vietnamese and the withdrawal of American troops. Addressing the G.O.P. Platform Panel on the War, Nixon stated

We need far greater and more urgent attention to training the South Vietnamese themselves, and equipping them with the best of modern weapons. As they are phased in, American troops can- and should- be phased out.

Nixon reiterated his thinking in a private question-and-answer session with southern delegates. Even though Nixon hardened his message to woo delegates away from the more bellicose, Ronald Reagan, he again focused on troop withdrawals rather than troop

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increases. Nixon declared, “We’ll be militarily strong and diplomatically strong. I think we’ve got to change our position regarding training the Vietnamese….We need a massive training program so that the South Vietnamese can be trained to take over the fighting—that they can be phased in as we phase out.” With Vietnamization now a key element of his stated foreign policy, Nixon wanted to get other Republicans behind the idea.

As the presumptive Republican nominee, Richard Nixon needed to get his policy into the party’s platform, but the GOP remained divided over Vietnam. The committee heard proposals calling for a tougher stance that included the possible use of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia as well as calls for the peaceful neutralization of all of Southeast Asia. Fortunately for Nixon, his allies dominated the platform committee, and he had the help of Melvin Laird, who had become a staunch Nixon supporter after Nixon won the Wisconsin primary on April 2. Laird arrived in Miami a week before the convention started and began ghostwriting the party platform. Like Nixon, Laird wanted to construct a foreign policy plank that appealed to every wing of the party while advancing the de-Americanization of the Vietnam War.

Thanks to Laird’s efforts, the committee adopted a centrist platform in line with Nixon’s campaign strategy. Laird told the committee, “This Convention and its deliberations represent the most crucial and the most critical of any that I have attended in the past twenty years.” Laird then pressed upon them his belief that “in a very real sense, this society of ours seems to be coming apart.” For Laird, the GOP platform on

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Vietnam would have to show a willingness to ameliorate social tension while maintaining a sense of direction on foreign affairs. As a result, the Vietnam plank condemned the Johnson administration for embroiling America in a costly land war and for its lack of credibility. The platform also pledged “a progressive de-Americanization of the war” and promised vigorous peace negotiations leading to a just peace “based on the principle of self-determination, our national interests and the cause of long-range world peace.”

Republican strategists never outlined how their nominee would accomplish Vietnamization and bring peace with honor, but their immediate concern was uniting the party and winning the election. A practical solution to the Vietnam morass would have to wait until the GOP regained the White House.

Nixon easily won his party’s nomination and immediately began unifying the party while preparing for the general election. Republicans were all too eager to get behind Nixon’s moderate policies after Barry Goldwater’s ultra-conservative 1964 campaign had divided and almost destroyed the GOP. For his part, Nixon avoided the Vietnam issue after the convention. Instead, he focused on what was his real campaign theme: restoring law and order. The year’s domestic turmoil had upset millions of Americans and a return to normalcy made a persuasive campaign issue. Nonetheless, by the end of the Republican Convention and his acceptance of the presidential nomination on August 8, Nixon had laid the groundwork for what Melvin Laird would later term Vietnamization.

Whereas Republicans consistently tried to maintain a united front, the Democratic Party remained bitterly divided throughout 1968. When asked to make his own predictions on the Democratic nomination process, Representative Melvin Laird responded, “I think they are going to tear themselves apart.” Laird proved prescient as Vietnam splintered the party. Even after Vice President Hubert Humphrey won his party’s nomination, his relationship to LBJ’s positions on the war jeopardized his success. Saddled with Johnson’s war, the Democratic Party faced an uphill battle against the Republicans in 1968.

One Democratic contender found limited political success by throwing off the yoke of the Vietnam War and running as the antiwar candidate. Senator Eugene McCarthy (MN) never held out hope for electoral victory but he felt a moral obligation to run as a protest against the war. McCarthy promised an ambiguous “political solution” to end the war, but it was enough of an alternative to LBJ’s policies to rally antiwar forces. In the process, McCarthy captured the attention of those college students who had turned against the war but were still willing to work within the framework of the political establishment. Indeed, a large part of McCarthy’s motivation came from a desire to engage the baby boomer generation. The senator feared that an increasingly radical antiwar movement endangered America’s commitment to anticommunism and could ultimately encourage the nation’s youths to give up on the political process. His campaign would provide a traditional outlet for anti-Johnson sentiment. Despite his

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160 Interview on From the People, folder “Speeches- Feb. 1968-From the People,” Box A17, LP.
small army of college-age volunteers, Senator McCarthy’s campaign gained little momentum until after the Tet Offensive.\textsuperscript{161}

The Tet Offensive intensified antiwar/anti-Johnson sentiment, boosting McCarthy’s popularity and leading to a surprisingly strong showing in the March 12 New Hampshire primary. In early 1968, President Johnson and other political observers had largely ignored McCarthy’s feeble efforts to capture the party’s nomination, but beneath the surface, he was making headway. Two days before the primary, \textit{The New York Times} reported General Westmoreland’s request for 206,000 more troops in Vietnam. This news increased American pessimism on the war, helping McCarthy’s campaign. Although Senator McCarthy was unable to win the primary, he captured 42 percent of the New Hampshire vote.

This result was one of the greatest political surprises in U.S. history and one that greatly affected how Democrats approached the war and the 1968 presidential election. Johnson strategists had predicted McCarthy would capture no more than 15 percent of the vote. While Johnson’s status as a write-in candidate certainly hurt his performance, the small margin of the president’s victory was particularly upsetting given the fact that the state’s Democratic machinery overwhelmingly supported LBJ. Polling data would later indicate that McCarthy’s near victory was the result of anti-Johnson rather than antiwar sentiment, but the result bolstered Democratic doves. Most important of all, the political shocker persuaded Senator Robert F. Kennedy (D-NY) to run for president. Although Kennedy’s candidacy would splinter the antiwar/anti-Johnson Democrats, Kennedy’s

\textsuperscript{161} Powers, \textit{The War at Home}, 287, 289; and LaFeber, \textit{The Deadly Bet}, 33, 37-38.
announcement, in combination with the McCarthy upset, played a large role in President Johnson’s decision not to run for reelection.\textsuperscript{162}

With Johnson out of the race, his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, stepped in to fill the gap. The Minnesota Democrat had been a lifelong champion of American liberalism, but because of the antiwar movement, his greatest criticism came from the left. A private critic of Johnson’s Americanization of the war, Humphrey found himself barred from discussions on Vietnam in 1965, and after he suggested Johnson pursue a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, the vice president fell completely out of favor with the president.\textsuperscript{163} In an attempt to regain Johnson’s trust, Humphrey became an adamant supporter of the Vietnam War, holding pro-war rallies throughout the country. These circumstances put Humphrey in a bind in 1968. To many Americans, Humphrey appeared to be nothing more than a kinder, gentler version of Lyndon B. Johnson. For his part, Humphrey tried to do the impossible: please both pro-Johnson and antiwar Democrats. It was only after the Democratic National Convention that he realized the futility of such an approach, and afterwards he belatedly began moving towards a dovish position.\textsuperscript{164}

Even before the convention began, Vietnam divided the party as the platform committee struggled to adopt a plank on the war. As summed up by historian Dennis Wainstock, McCarthy proposed a platform advocating “a general de-escalation of the war, an unconditional bombing halt, and establishment of a coalition government in South Vietnam that would include substantial participation by the National Liberation

\textsuperscript{162} LaFeber, \textit{The Deadly Bet}, 43-45, 47; and Powers, \textit{The War at Home}, 291.
\textsuperscript{163} Logevall, \textit{Choosing War}, 314, 331, 394.
\textsuperscript{164} LaFeber, \textit{The Deadly Bet}, 117, 121, 123-124.
Front.” Reflecting President Johnson’s stance on the war, Humphrey was only willing to support a conditional bombing halt of North Vietnam and rejected the rest of the McCarthy platform. Democratic doves began to compromise on some issues but they remained committed to an unconditional bombing halt, making it the critical issue at the convention. On the other side, LBJ refused to endorse any plank that mentioned an unconditional stop of the bombing, and his resolve stiffened Humphrey’s opposition to the doves. Despite Humphrey’s willingness to compromise, he feared Johnson would sabotage his nomination if he differed from the president. With neither side willing to compromise on the bombing, Democratic doves and hawks continued their quarrel in Chicago.165

From August 26 to 29, pandemonium reigned both inside and outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Although the violent protests received the most attention, the convention hall was only slightly more peaceful. Robert Kennedy’s assassination on June 4 eliminated Humphrey’s closest competitor for the nomination, and 1968 was the last presidential election year where primaries did not play a decisive role in choosing the Democratic nominee. Humphrey easily secured the nomination by gaining the support of the Democratic establishment, which chose far more delegates than McCarthy had won in the primaries. This outcome only intensified antiwar hostility to Humphrey’s campaign while frustrating those youths who sought change through the established political mechanisms.

Meanwhile, the fight over the war plank resulted in a bitter public debate that only hardened the party’s divisions. As adopted, the platform rejected any unilateral

165 Wainstock, The Turning Point, 128-132.
withdrawal of U.S. soldiers. Troop withdrawals remained predicated on the mutual withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces, a policy very different from the Republican’s de-Americanization platform. The Democratic platform did include support for accelerating the training and build up of South Vietnam’s military, though. In a final blow to antiwar Democrats, the plank avoided calls for an unconditional bombing halt. The result was a rancorous dispute that seemingly ended any hope for party unity.166

After winning the Democratic nomination, Hubert Humphrey attempted to reunite the party, and the intransigence of party doves caused him to move away from Johnson’s Vietnam policies. Antiwar protests marred Humphrey’s campaign stops, frustrating the presidential aspirant. To pollsters, journalists, and political observers, Humphrey appeared to have little chance of turning his campaign around and winning in November. Facing long odds and passionate protestors, Humphrey decided he had little to lose by abandoning the Johnson plank.167

On September 9, Humphrey made a fundamental change in his rhetoric on Vietnam. Humphrey told an audience in Philadelphia, “I would think that, negotiations or no negotiations, we could start to remove some of the American forces in early 1969 or late 1968.”168 By September 30, Humphrey had developed and expanded his de-escalation policy. On that date in Salt Lake City, he announced he was willing to try an

167 Wainstock, The Turning Point, 155-156.
unconditional bombing halt and would propose an immediate cease-fire if elected. Humphrey went on to state his belief that given South Vietnamese strength, it was time to “set a specific timetable by which American forces could be systematically reduced while South Vietnamese forces took over more and more of the burden.” Humphrey’s speech angered President Johnson but it succeeded in securing the support of Democratic doves. After this speech, Humphrey’s campaign began gaining momentum, making for a very tight presidential race.

Historians and political analysts often criticize Humphrey for not going further to distance himself from Johnson’s war policies, but Republican strategists successfully prevented the Democratic candidate from outflanking Nixon on the Vietnam War. Laird had long maintained that the GOP must run as the peace party to win the 1968 election, and Humphrey’s shift towards deescalation threatened this position. Laird learned that Humphrey was planning to announce that his first act as president would be the immediate withdrawal of 25,000 U.S. troops from South Vietnam. On September 24, Laird preempted Humphrey by telling members of the press traveling with the Nixon campaign that the improvement of ARVN forces meant that by June 1969, the United States could reduce its commitment by 90,000 soldiers. The Johnson administration quickly repudiated Laird’s judgment. Secretary of Defense Clifford publicly denied that any such plans were in the works and instead countered that the number of U.S. troops in

169 Ibid., 161.
170 Wainstock, The Turning Point, 160-162.
171 Melvin R. Laird, “Statement by Representative Melvin R. Laird (R-Wis) in answer to a question concerning Vice-President Humphrey’s troop withdrawals statement.” September 24, 1968, folder “Campaign 1968, Laird/Nixon Traveling File,” Box A4, LP.
South Vietnam would continue to increase as established by prior war planning.\textsuperscript{172} Clifford’s statements not only contradicted Humphrey’s claims that a systematic withdrawal plan was in the works but also worked to prevent Humphrey from announcing that he would begin withdrawing troops after his inauguration. Humphrey could not announce withdrawals so soon after the Johnson administration had so strongly denounced them. Laird recalled, “And that stopped Humphrey. If Humphrey would have gone ahead with his plan, then Nixon wouldn’t have been president.”\textsuperscript{173} With Humphrey unable to announce planned troop withdrawals, both parties offered similar de-Americanization strategies to the electorate.\textsuperscript{174}

Indeed, Nixon avoided specific pronouncements on foreign affairs after the Republican National Convention. Humphrey’s feeble attempts to break with Johnson allowed Nixon to keep declaring he would “end the war on an honorable basis” without explaining his negotiation strategy or Vietnamization in any detail. Nixon implied that he would de-Americanize the war and negotiate a settlement by making concessions that the Johnson administration could not make without appearing to have sold out to the communists, but he never laid out how he would accomplish these aims. In short, Nixon had no secret plan but tailored his rhetoric to give the illusion that he did.\textsuperscript{175}

Yet, Vietnam was not the only issue that occupied the nation’s attention. Racial riots, campus unrest, violent antiwar protests, and the counterculture movement alarmed


\textsuperscript{174} Melvin R. Laird, interview with author, June 21, 2007.

most Americans, spurring a conservative reaction. Large numbers of Americans wanted
the next president to return law and order to the nation, and Richard Nixon and American
Independent Party candidate, George Wallace, made this theme a focal point of their
campaigns. On the other hand, Humphrey found it impossible to reach out to those
Americans wanting a tough stand on crime and protests without alienating his support on
the left. With the conservative presidential candidates, Nixon and Wallace, getting 56
percent of the vote, Alan Brinkley notes, “However much radical politics seemed to
dominate the public face of 1968, the most important political legacy of that critical year
was the rise of the Right.” Indeed, America’s desire for law and order played a decisive
role in Nixon’s narrow victory over Humphrey. Nixon was now free to chart his own
path in Vietnam.176

Nineteen sixty-eight was a critical year in the origins of Vietnamization. The Tet
Offensive led to a reevaluation of U.S. policies in Vietnam. In reappraising the situation,
policymakers began drawing up plans to withdraw American troops according to a
Manila-like settlement and accelerated programs to build up ARVN forces. Meanwhile,
the year’s widespread domestic unrest convinced Washington insiders that America’s
Vietnam policies would have to change to alleviate this increasingly violent anti-
establishment sentiment. The 1968 presidential election reflected these circumstances as
both candidates eventually adopted de-Americanization platforms. Most importantly of

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176 LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet*, 131-132, 135-136, 171; and Brinkley, “1968 and the Unraveling of
Liberal America,” 220.
all, these events affected how Laird approached the Vietnam War as Secretary of Defense in 1969.

Laird had not planned to leave Congress, but once he accepted the cabinet post, the evolution of his own views on the situations in Vietnam and America predisposed him to the Vietnamization plan he would ultimately develop. After the election, Laird urged Nixon to appoint Democratic Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson as his Secretary of Defense. Only after Jackson refused did Nixon pressure Laird into taking the post. Representative Laird’s dedication to the Republic of South Vietnam would lead him to accelerate the Johnson administration’s plans to strengthen the South Vietnamese military. As a result of 1968’s social unrest, Laird concluded that the United States would have to begin bringing troops home to stop the apparent unraveling of American society and to ease domestic pressure to end America’s commitment to South Vietnam. Laird recalled, “That primary goal was dictated by the American public, not by anybody else.” Fortunately, Laird could build on Nixon’s campaign rhetoric, which promised both aspects as a part of a de-Americanization policy. Thus, by the end of 1968, Melvin Laird had fused the twin pillars of Vietnamization: the buildup of South Vietnam and the systematic, unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces from Southeast Asia. He now had to develop Vietnamization into a working program and then implement it despite Henry Kissinger’s determined efforts to derail it.177

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3. Vietnamization Is Born

“I don’t care what anybody else told you. [Nixon] had no plan. I developed the plan.” ~ Melvin Laird

Richard Nixon’s electoral victory gave Republicans the opportunity to implement their de-Americanization strategy, but this did not mean that the journey from the election on November 5, 1968 to Nixon’s announcement on June 8, 1969 of the beginning of troop withdrawals was a straightforward or smooth one. As policy decisions often go, it was a path riddled with twists and turns, with an outcome that was far from determined. Many individuals would play a role in this drama, but none quite as significant as the new Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird.

Melvin Laird was Vietnamization’s principal architect and advocate. In early 1969, the Secretary of Defense turned Nixon’s campaign rhetoric into a workable plan. Laird forcefully recalled, “[Nixon] had no plan. I developed the [Vietnamization] plan.” Laird took advantage of the administration’s formative months to advance his Vietnamization plan and then gain authorization to carry it out while other departments were still settling in. Laird also protected Vietnamization from Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger’s preference for a more militant foreign policy in Vietnam. Without Laird’s moderating influence, Vietnamization would have never become a legitimate option in 1969, and the Nixon administration could have easily escalated rather than deescalated the war.

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178 Interview with Melvin Laird by Tom Wells, 1. Emphasis in original.
It was appropriate that both Laird and Nixon met with their respective predecessors before assuming office. Nixon later recalled that during his November 11 visit to the White House, Lyndon Johnson and his “very nearly worn out” advisers urged him to make sure the United States saw “the war through to a successful conclusion-with negotiations if possible, but with continued fighting if necessary.”\(^{179}\) At this briefing, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford stated that Nixon could continue the fighting and avoid negotiations, pursue private negotiations with the North Vietnamese that excluded South Vietnam, or pressure the South Vietnamese President, Nguyen Van Thieu, into participating in the Paris negotiations. Clifford believed the last option held the most promise and would allow the Johnson administration to reduce the level of American combat in Vietnam and begin withdrawing troops, thus setting the stage for peace early in Nixon’s tenure. Instead, RN dismissed these recommendations, later writing that Johnson’s advisers presented nothing new at this meeting.\(^{180}\)

Clifford would also have the opportunity to share his ideas with Laird, and at their first private meeting on December 12, 1968, it became clear to Clifford that the incoming secretary of defense looked favorably on a withdrawal of U.S. troops. Clifford later wrote that he “was particularly pleased to discover that [Laird] saw as his first major task finding a way out of the Vietnam morass,” and he pressed Laird to withdraw American forces regardless of what occurred at the Paris negotiations. Indicating the course of his

\(^{179}\) Nixon, \textit{RN}, 336.
\(^{180}\) Willbanks, \textit{Abandoning Vietnam}, 8.
own policies as secretary of defense, Laird requested that Clifford have Paul Warnke stay on at the Department of Defense.\textsuperscript{181}

Laird’s desire to keep Warnke indicates that by mid-December Laird needed no additional encouragement to develop a plan for Vietnamization. As previously noted, Paul Warnke believed America’s entrance into the war had been a mistake and that it was now impossible to win the war with the number of troops the United States could reasonably commit.\textsuperscript{182} In accordance with this reasoning, Warnke had developed a plan to begin the withdrawal of 50,000 U.S. troops. This grim outlook on the war would make Warnke the last person an optimistic nominee for Secretary of Defense would want to retain. Yet, it was because of this appraisal and plan for action that Laird requested Warnke stay on, demonstrating that Laird was looking for an exit strategy before his meeting with Clifford. More important, Laird later acknowledged that Warnke’s plan became the basis for Vietnamization, and the two immediately began work on a Vietnamization plan.\textsuperscript{183}

In the interim, Nixon and Kissinger were working on their own plans and coming to different conclusions than Laird and Warnke. Nixon and company had established their pre-inaugural base of operations in the elite Hotel Pierre in New York City. As Roger Morris has written, “From within the Pierre [Nixon and Kissinger] promptly conceived and began what would become a seizure of power unprecedented in modern American foreign policy.” Although Morris was referring to the restructuring of decision-making in the government, his observation is relevant to the discussion of warning and planning in Vietnam.

\textsuperscript{181} Clifford, \textit{Counsel to the President}, 603-604.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., 490-491.
making within the executive bureaucracy, one could make a similar statement about Nixon and Kissinger’s Vietnam planning. Unencumbered by the bureaucratic process, Nixon and Kissinger believed they could use their skills and consolidated power to end the Vietnam War in 1969, and so they spent much of their time at Hotel Pierre devising how they would conduct and ultimately conclude the war.¹⁸⁴

From their first meeting at the Hotel Pierre, Nixon and Kissinger assumed some withdrawal of American troops.¹⁸⁵ Yet, they had not resolved how they would remove the soldiers and under what circumstances this withdrawal would occur. Even the term withdrawal could mean almost anything, and so Kissinger commissioned the RAND Corporation to ascertain their options.

The RAND paper identified seven options, ranging from “military escalation aimed at negotiated victory” to the “unilateral withdrawal of all U.S. forces within one to two years” with or without a settlement.¹⁸⁶ Most of these seven options had their own adherents within the U.S. bureaucracy, the exception being the extreme withdrawal scenario. The RAND paper noted that the remaining six options had various levels of support within Washington. The paper then went on to divide the government into two broad camps, each with its own strategy to end the Vietnam War.¹⁸⁷

The first, or Group A, consisted of high-level State Department officials, American diplomats serving in Saigon, some CIA analysts, and military officers on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). They argued

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 153.
¹⁸⁶ Isaacson, Kissinger, 162.
¹⁸⁷ Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, 91.
that the enemy was still on the run nearly a year after the Tet Offensive and that the United States should maintain or perhaps even escalate military pressure on communist forces. Their escalation options included “air and ground operations in Cambodia and Laos; unrestricted bombing and mining of North Vietnam; limited invasion of North Vietnam and Laos; full-scale invasion of North Vietnam; or any combination of these.” Aware that several of these options would require increased troop levels and defense expenditures, these planners believed the American public would bear the additional burden. They hoped that the credible threat of escalation alone would force the North Vietnamese to accept a negotiated settlement but they did not rule out the implementation of these policies. Within this first group, a select number of officials advocated a counterinsurgency strategy. This strategy would allow for the withdrawal of some troops and represented the closest thing to a de-escalatory policy presented by Group A.\footnote{Kimball, \textit{Nixon's Vietnam War}, 91-92.}

Representing Clifford’s Defense Department and a small group of State Department and CIA officials, Group B saw a foreign and domestic crisis as the only possible outcome of military escalation and counterinsurgency operations. Their solution was diplomatic compromise. Adherents recommended various combinations of mutual withdrawal, de-escalation, and a coalition government to facilitate a negotiated peace. One option was the decent interval that called for a mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces in order to give the South Vietnamese government a chance at survival but at the same time willing to accept an indigenous communist take-over after the American withdrawal. The most dovish option presented by Group B and the one that most closely resembled Vietnamization called for a “substantial reduction in U.S.
presence while seeking a compromise settlement” and building up South Vietnamese forces.\textsuperscript{189} Above all else, Group B’s disengagement strategies stood in stark contrast to the escalatory measures proposed by Group A.\textsuperscript{190}

The RAND paper offered bureaucratic insights and a spectrum of choices, and Nixon and Kissinger began refining them into a workable policy in late December. Nixon later reflected, “A strong case could be made for each option,”\textsuperscript{191} but at the very first discussion, Kissinger eliminated unilateral withdrawal as a viable choice.\textsuperscript{192} Nixon concurred, later writing that it was unthinkable “that the United States withdraw unilaterally and acquiesce in the overthrow of the South Vietnamese government in exchange for the return of American prisoners of war.” In his retrospective, \textit{No More Vietnams}, Nixon wrote that he also ruled out military escalation. He believed that armed conflict alone could not end the Vietnam War and that escalation might jeopardize his goal of establishing better relations with the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Nevertheless, Nixon would seriously consider escalating the war later that year. Perhaps most importantly though, Nixon did not believe he could hold the country together long enough to win the war with military means. The public simply could not sustain the American casualties needed for a military victory. RN recalled, “As I studied the option papers before my inauguration, I realized that I had no good choices. But Presidents are not elected to make easy decisions.”\textsuperscript{193}

\textsuperscript{189} Isaacson, \textit{Kissinger}, 163.
\textsuperscript{190} Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 92-93.
\textsuperscript{191} Nixon, \textit{RN}, 347.
\textsuperscript{192} Isaacson, \textit{Kissinger} 163.
People do elect presidents to make decisions, though, and Nixon failed to settle on even a general plan of action before his inauguration. Nixon found himself caught somewhere between escalation and withdrawal with no happy medium. At his inauguration on January 20, 1969, Nixon possessed no secret plan. Indeed, National Security Council aide Roger Morris concluded, “The dominant quality of Nixon’s first official responses to the war was indecision.”

Shrewd as ever, Kissinger tried to use the absence of a plan to his advantage. The opportunity came when one of the RAND paper’s authors suggested Kissinger “put a series of questions to the different agencies, make them answer separately, and compare the discrepancies.” Although its purpose was to provide detailed information on how the various government agencies grappled with the war, Kissinger saw it as a means to overwhelm the bureaucracy he so despised. According to Morris, Kissinger saw bureaucracy as being “‘designed to execute, not to conceive,’ paralyzed by ‘its quest for safety,’ was ‘diametrically opposed’ to the spirited development of good policy, which thrived on ‘perpetual motion’ and abhorred routine.” In short, Nixon and Kissinger could only develop statesman-like foreign policy when the State Department and other institutions left them alone, and so forcing these groups to answer a detailed questionnaire kept them from meddling with Nixon and Kissinger’s real efforts to end the war. Explaining his reasoning to an aide, Kissinger declared, “I’m tying up the bureaucracy for a year and buying time for the new president.”

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195 Ibid., 53-54
Nixon strongly believed they could end the war in a year. If they could keep the Washington bureaucracy out of their power politics, they might just be able to do it. Therefore, Kissinger issued National Security Study Memorandum 1 on January 21 as a diversionary tactic. Addressed to the CIA director and the Secretaries of State and Defense, NSSM 1 consisted of several pages of detailed questions certain to incite bureaucratic warfare between Groups A and B. In the meantime, Kissinger could work on preventing a quick unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops and start negotiating a settlement favorable to the United States and South Vietnam.

In the midst of these bureaucratic struggles, one thing was clear to all those involved: public opinion mattered. When the Gallup Poll asked Americans in January 1969 if “the time has come to reduce month by month the number of United States soldiers in Vietnam,” fifty-seven percent answered yes. In that same survey, forty percent of Americans indicated the Vietnam War was the most important problem facing the country. In a survey conducted later that month, fifty-two percent of Americans said, “The United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam.” Although few Americans were calling for an immediate pullout, the national mood clearly favored some form of de-escalation.

Yet, it was not so much surveys in early 1969 as their experiences in 1968 that convinced policymakers to de-escalate the war. As historian Jeremi Suri put it, “The

198 Isaacson, Kissinger, 164-165.
entire world shook in 1968. Across cultures, people of all generations recognized the significance of the moment. A global wave of urban protests produced a crisis of authority in nearly every society.” From racial riots to antiwar protests, Washington decision makers saw a society on the brink of social collapse. They had no way of knowing that after 1968 the worst had passed. For all they knew, 1969 could become much worse. Even if social disintegration represented the worst-case scenario, policymakers had to admit that events in 1967 and 1968 had steadily reduced public support for the war. If this trend continued, domestic sentiment could force the Nixon administration’s hand by catalyzing antiwar sentiment in Congress, potentially cutting off war funding. These fears in turn affected the development of Nixon’s foreign policy.202

Hence, public opinion became a recurring theme within these early policy discussions. In a pre-inaugural meeting, Nixon told Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., American head of the Paris peace talks, to inform the South Vietnamese that while they could count on Nixon’s strong support, “they should understand that American public opinion was in a highly critical condition.”203 Nixon reiterated this point at the first major National Security Council meeting, stating that while the United States should hang on in Vietnam, the domestic unrest would make it “very difficult to continue without some change.”204 Indeed, the critical state of American public opinion was so apparent that even Ellsworth Bunker, the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, felt it in Saigon. In a January 24 telegram, Bunker assured Secretary of State William Rogers, “All of us here

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fully understand the great importance of making rapid progress in the negotiations, and I am quite aware of the pressures from American public and Congressional opinion.”

Americans clearly wanted the new administration to end the war, and many policymakers believed de-escalation would alleviate domestic pressure. America’s former chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks, Averell Harriman noted, “It was essential to reduce American casualties and get some of our troops coming home in order to retain the support of the American people.” Vietnamization would attempt to do just that. In an interview nearly two decades later, Laird recalled that the attitude of the American public dictated Vietnamization become his top priority. “We had to get with it,” Laird affirmed. “The whole country was fed up with this [war].”

And get with it he did. Unlike President Nixon, Secretary of Defense Laird came in determined to build up the South Vietnamese army while simultaneously bringing American boys home. Laird’s experience on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and his work with McNamara, Clifford, Warnke, and other present and former defense officials in the pre-inaugural period worked in his favor. These encounters allowed Laird to assemble a crack team of policymakers while Kissinger and his National Security Council staff were struggling to find their way. With the Warnke plan as his model,
Laird and his Vietnam Task Group immediately started the Defense Department working on an official Vietnamization plan.\textsuperscript{209}

Meanwhile most of the foreign policy bureaucracy floundered on NSSM 1. As anticipated, the military differed sharply with the CIA, State Department, and Defense Department civilians. The military asserted the situation in Vietnam was improving whereas Group B policymakers saw the war as a perpetual stalemate. Of course, Kissinger’s National Security Council staff had to answer its own questions; Kissinger had inadvertently tied up his own bureaucracy. Although Kissinger later wrote that “the answers to [NSSM 1] made clear that there was no consensus as to facts, much less as to policy,”\textsuperscript{210} the bureaucratic squabbling over NSSM 1 gave Laird time to formalize his policy while the NSC attempted to answer its own questions.\textsuperscript{211} Thus, Kissinger’s shrewd diversionary tactics worked in Laird’s favor.\textsuperscript{212}

Although options on unilateral U.S. withdrawal did not dominate President Nixon’s first National Security Council meeting on January 25, they did keep reappearing throughout discussions on Vietnam. CIA director Richard Helms gave the day’s first briefing, and it was not long before the issue came up. Discussing the internal situation in South Vietnam, Helms “concluded that under the present ground rules, assuming the withdrawal of [U.S.] troops, South Vietnam would be able to go it alone in approximately one year.” Representing the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the next briefer offered another optimistic view of the situation in South Vietnam. These presentations were so positive

\textsuperscript{209} Selin, “Vietnamization,” 8.
\textsuperscript{210} Henry Kissinger quoted in Willbanks, 12.
\textsuperscript{211} Selin, “Vietnamization,” 8-9.
\textsuperscript{212} Willbanks, Abandoning Vietnam, 10-12.
Secretary of Defense Laird interjected, “I have heard these briefings each year and each year they get more optimistic and, therefore, I hope that we will be very careful in digesting the material which is put forth.” Subsequent presenters tempered the initial optimism, but the state of public opinion meant that they would have to discuss the option of unilateral withdrawal in somewhat greater detail.213

Towards the end of the meeting, Secretary of State Rogers returned to the issue of unilateral withdrawal. After listening to Nixon’s concerns over the American public accepting a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam, Rogers opined, “I think we can expect more from the American people, especially if we could at some point reduce our commitment by perhaps 50,000.” Although Nixon wanted six months of strong military action, he concurred with Rogers’s assessment, stating that perhaps such a gesture would buy the administration some time and some public support. Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson wondered why the president could not pursue negotiations and a robust military offensive while removing a small number of U.S. troops in three or four months. After a short discussion, Nixon agreed. Nixon proposed that they continue pacifying the South Vietnamese countryside, strengthening the South Vietnamese regime, and negotiating with the North. Then in three or four months, “bring home a few troops unilaterally as a separate and distinct action from the Paris negotiations, and as a ploy for more time domestically, while we continue to press at the negotiating table for a military settlement.”214

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Nixon tried to keep unilateral withdrawal separate from the Paris negotiations to prevent the communist negotiators from linking the two. American diplomats in Paris consistently stressed mutual withdrawal. Should they ever indicate a willingness to pull out of Vietnam unilaterally as part of a negotiated settlement, they would lose much of their bargaining power. Furthermore, to maximize the public relations gain, Nixon ordered policymakers to keep their considerations of a small troop reduction secret. If the government decided to withdraw troops, Nixon would do the announcing and he would do it in such a way as to wow the public and the press.\(^{215}\)

As January turned into February, the president did little to formalize or develop a plan to reduce the numbers of American troops in Vietnam or deescalate the conflict in Southeast Asia. Instead, Nixon ordered General Wheeler to try to find “new ways to increase the pressure militarily [against North Vietnam] without going to the point that we break off negotiations.”\(^{216}\) In response, the Joint Chiefs of Staff provided plans for actual or feigned offensives against North Vietnam as well as the communist supply lines in Laos and Cambodia. The Joint Chiefs even went so far as to include the possible use of nuclear weapons as a part of Nixon’s escalatory tactics. In Nixon’s mind, the United States should hammer communist forces during his first months in office to achieve a swift, negotiated end to the war.\(^{217}\)

\(^{215}\) Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, January 29, 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 6:43.

\(^{216}\) Richard Nixon, February 1 memo to Kissinger, attached to Kissinger’s memo to Laird, folder “Sec Def Correspondence- Southeast Asia (1),” Box D11, LP.

The question of de-escalation did not fall off the diplomatic radar, though. Rather, several key figures debated the possible effects a reduction might have on the Paris negotiations. Now in Paris as the American head of the peace talks, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. sent a letter to Nixon on February 12, urging him to order top U.S. generals to find ways of reduce American casualties in Vietnam. Lodge believed this reduction was essential to strengthening the U.S. negotiating position. Moreover, Lodge asserted that if by next August, military deaths were still at their present level of two hundred per week, “public opinion may well become quite wild and erratic. At the least, there will be a strong demand to hurry. Undoubtedly the North Vietnamese think this too and are prepared to wait us out. To be in a hurry when your opponent is not puts one in a very weak negotiating position.” The adoption of less intense battlefield tactics would be one way of diminishing the number of American casualties. Such a strategy would send South Vietnamese rather than U.S. soldiers into the most dangerous hotspots. Recognizing that the vast majority of Americans only paid attention to the number of dead and wounded Americans, Lodge believed that this change would give the illusion that Nixon had deescalated the war and therefore ease domestic pressure on the administration to end the war.²¹⁸

Always the realist, Kissinger had trouble accepting the notion that de-escalation would benefit the negotiations. For Kissinger, nations had to back their diplomacy with a realistic threat of force. After working with Kissinger on several occasions, Daniel Ellsberg hit the nail on the head when he told *Rolling Stone* magazine, “Kissinger has a

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very strong ideological belief in the efficacy and legitimacy of the threat of violence as a tool of power.”\textsuperscript{219} Reducing the military offensive would only diminish this vital instrument of foreign policy. In a March 8 memo to Nixon, Kissinger declared that the U.S. military effort was one of the few bargaining weapons they had, and any de-escalation made it easier for the communists to conduct guerilla operations in South Vietnam. Kissinger continued, “Thus, de-escalation would amount to a self-imposed defusing of our most important asset and the simultaneous enhancement of [their] most important asset—terrorism. We would, in effect, be tying the hands of our forces in Vietnam.” Having railed against any immediate de-escalation, Kissinger assured the president that he was working on a “game plan.”\textsuperscript{220}

While Kissinger was composing this memo to Nixon, Secretary of Defense Laird was visiting American and South Vietnamese leaders in Vietnam, enlisting their support for his own plan. By early March, Laird and his Vietnam Task Group had developed the basic contours of a Vietnamization plan centered on unilateral American troop withdrawals and the strengthening of ARVN forces. To sell his plan to the president and make it work, Laird needed to secure the approval and cooperation of South Vietnam’s president, Nguyen Van Thieu, as well as that of MACV’s commander, General Creighton Abrams. Lasting from March 5 to March 12, Laird’s first trip to Vietnam as secretary of defense represents an important milestone in his push for Vietnamization.

American military leaders were aware of his intentions, though. While preparing to brief Laird, Major General Phillip Davidson remarked that secretaries of defense

\textsuperscript{219} Daniel Ellsberg quoted in Isaacson, \textit{Kissinger}, 164.

\textsuperscript{220} Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, March 8, 1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:98-99.
always have a hidden agenda when they visit Vietnam. In his experience, McNamara came with the intention of questioning Westmoreland’s use of troops; Clifford’s visit was to ascertain what the American military was doing to improve the South Vietnamese army. Davidson then proceeded to speculate on Laird’s motive. He ruminated, “My guess is that the hidden theme this time, and there’s no word of it on the agenda, is, ‘When can you start withdrawing troops? … How can you cut down the cost of the war in either manpower, matériel, or cut down the psychological and political costs?’” Lamenting outside pressure to deescalate the war and begin withdrawing U.S. troops, Davidson and several others heartily asserted MACV’s strategy should be to win the war. “Let’s kick the hell out of [the enemy],” Davidson proclaimed. “Now that means that you’re going to get men killed and hurt. The furtherest thought from our mind is, ‘How can you reduce casualties?’” Made the day before Laird’s March 6 briefing, these strong comments indicate the level of hostility some military leaders directed towards de-escalation. Vietnamization would not be an easy sell.

Proving Major General Davidson’s instincts correct, Laird constantly stressed America’s apprehension over the war and the need to formulate and implement a plan for de-escalation before American patience ran out. Laird opined to Abrams and others that the public was giving Nixon a brief grace period. The secretary kept reminding them, “We’ve got to make the best possible use of time that we have.” Laird later told Nixon, “Just as it was [the military leadership’s] duty to provide for me the picture of what was happening in Southeast Asia, it was my duty to provide for them the realities of the

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situation in the United States.”222 Continuing this line of thought, Laird contended that he and the MACV commanders must work together to develop a plan that showed the American people they were committed to protecting U.S. troops from undue risk while preserving self-determination in South Vietnam. According to Laird (and predicted by Davidson), the plan would also have “to reduce the United States contribution, not only in the form of men, but in casualties and matériel and in dollars.” To give Abrams some idea of what to expect, Laird suggested Abrams plan for a withdrawal of 44,000 troops sometime in the next three or four months.223 The plan Laird was proposing they work together to create was the Vietnamization plan he and Vietnam Task Group had already devised back in Washington.224

Laird believed that Abrams’s consent and cooperation was vital to the program’s success and on this trip, he worked hard to win Abrams’s support. Laird realized he was asking the impossible, “[Abrams] had been engaged in a limited war-- using limited means, with a limited objective-- against an enemy whose objectives were not limited. Now he would have to continue fighting this war and, at the same time, guide the withdrawal of our men and train the South Vietnamese army.”225 Although Abrams saw the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as improving, he believed that without the help of U.S. troops and military aid, South Vietnam would not survive a dual attack from the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese army.226 Should negotiations for

223 Clarke, Advice and Support, 347.
a mutual withdrawal fail, Abrams maintained that the United States should predicate any unilateral U.S. withdrawal on pacification of the South Vietnamese countryside, improvement in the South Vietnamese army, and a diminished threat from the North Vietnamese. Yet, Laird’s emphasis on the political, economic, and strategic consequences of continuing the war at the present level of American involvement persuaded Abrams to approve his Vietnamization plan. Laird later wrote that as he carried out Vietnamization over Nixon and Kissinger’s protests, it would often seem that General Abrams was his only ally. By securing the support of the American commander in Vietnam, Laird had indeed gained a powerful ally in his effort to convince Nixon of the plan’s viability.

While in Saigon, the secretary of defense also obtained President Thieu’s approval for a U.S. troop withdrawal. Laird’s petition was more of a formality than a diplomatic success. Thieu had been quietly suggesting that the United States withdraw a small number of troops to ameliorate American unrest and encourage South Vietnamese confidence in their military. On February 6, 1969, Thieu made this intimation public when he declared that the United States could remove a large number of troops by the end of the year. In his private conversation with Laird on March 8, Thieu reiterated that he as well as other South Vietnamese leaders were prepared for and expected a reduction of U.S. forces on the order of fifty thousand to seventy thousand troops by the

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end of the year. Having secured a green light for troop withdrawal, Laird returned home to persuade the president of the United States to accept his Vietnamization plan.  

Back in Washington, Laird finished the plan with the aid of his military assistant Robert Pursley and Paul Warnke and then forwarded his proposal to the president on March 13. Contrary to other reports coming out of Vietnam, Laird’s memo bemoaned the slow progress of the ARVN modernization program and recommended that the United States step up efforts to arm the Vietnamese. The secretary of defense stated his sole purpose for modernizing ARVN forces was to allow the United States “to begin the process of replacing American forces in South Vietnam with better trained, better led, and better armed South Vietnamese military and para-military personnel.” Laird acknowledged the MACV assumption that the United States could not withdraw troops until there had been a similar withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops, but frankly told the president that America’s national interests and global commitments did not give them the liberty to “indulge in this assumption.” The memo then proposed that the secretary of defense direct a study to determine the best way to de-Americanize the war. As he conducted this analysis, Laird argued that the United States could withdraw fifty thousand to seventy thousand American troops by the year’s end. Laird assured Nixon that a redeployment of this magnitude would not jeopardize the security of Allied forces in Vietnam, but would instead help maintain the support of the American people for the war. The secretary of defense’s proposal marked the first formal plan presented to the

president, and it would achieve Laird’s goal of directing subsequent policy discussions towards troop redeployment.233

Although Nixon denied at a March 14 press conference that the administration was planning withdrawals, his statements were typical Nixon disinformation. In reality, Nixon’s March deliberations were moving towards a reduction of U.S. troops in Vietnam. At the press conference, he did say that in order to withdraw troops there would have to be progress in the negotiations, a diminished enemy threat, and proof that the South Vietnamese could replace American forces. The president did not immediately approve Laird’s recommendations, but a withdrawal of troops sometime in 1969 was in line with his private statements to policymakers earlier in the year.234

Revealing the Wise Men’s continued presence in the White House, Nixon solicited Dean Acheson’s advice on March 19. Acheson urged the president to begin a systematic withdrawal regardless of the course of negotiations. Acheson’s advice to Nixon was identical to what he had given LBJ in March 1968,235 but this time the commander-in-chief agreed with Acheson’s assessment. Whether Nixon agreed in order to secure the support of an influential Democrat and statesman, or whether he agreed because Acheson’s recommendation mirrored the administration’s mood is unknown. Regardless, Nixon was clearly moving in favor of some unilateral troop withdrawal.236

Not everyone agreed, though. An interagency dispute soon erupted over the actual improvement of the South Vietnamese military and whether or not the United States could reduce the level of U.S. troops without reducing the overall combat capability of Allied forces. A product of the NSSM imbroglio, these disagreements further factionalized the Washington bureaucracy. One of the few things they all agreed on was that even a modernized and expanded South Vietnamese army could not withstand dual attacks from the Vietcong and North Vietnamese army without extensive U.S. combat support. Laird and Secretary of State Rogers, who also believed for domestic reasons that it was time to de-Americanize the war, were staunch advocates of the troop withdrawal, whereas many on the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed these measures.237

These differences also came out at the March 28, 1969 National Security Council meeting. Most of those present assumed some level of de-escalation and at least a token withdrawal of U.S. soldiers, but they had to find a politically expedient way of justifying it. In the 1968 election, Nixon had laid the basis for a withdrawal contingent upon the buildup of ARVN forces, but at the March 14 news conference, he had added pacification and a reduction in the enemy threat to the mix. Rogers pointed out that pacification was “a poor explanation” for troop withdrawal, and Laird reiterated his observation that the South Vietnamese have “only a couple of divisions that are worth anything.” Nixon and company had already ruled out conditioning unilateral withdrawal on the negotiations progress to prevent tying their program to North Vietnamese actions. The discussion

then went back to ARVN improvements as an appropriate symbol to justify unilateral withdrawal. Betraying his frustration with the current state of de-Americanization and U.S. public opinion, Nixon declared:

> We need a plan. If we had no elections, it would be fine…The reality is that we are working against a time clock. We are talking 6 to 8 months. We are going to play a strong public game but we must plan this. We must get a sense of urgency in the training of the South Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{238}

Laird immediately followed up on Nixon’s comments by suggesting that instead of using the term de-Americanization, they develop “a term Vietnamizing to put the emphasis on the right issues.” What would become the term Vietnamization, sounded less like retreat and more like a goal oriented program designed to reduce the American presence while securing South Vietnam from communist aggression.\textsuperscript{239}

Having made a tacit decision to use improvement in the South Vietnamese military as a justification for unilateral withdrawal, the meeting shifted its attention to de-escalation. General Andrew Goodpaster believed that, depending on conditions, they could remove the first contingent in July but again insisted that the military wanted to look at the status of pacification, ARVN improvements, and enemy fighting before pulling troops out. Remaining ambiguous on his own views, Henry Kissinger separated unilateral withdrawal from his working definition of de-escalation. From that point on, the discussion focused on negotiations and the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and American forces.\textsuperscript{240}

\textsuperscript{239} Ibid., 169-170.
\textsuperscript{240} Ibid., 6:170-172.
Surprisingly, the meeting’s participants never directly addressed Laird’s March 13 Vietnamization proposal. Despite the brief discussion noted above, timetables for unilateral withdrawal were missing from the debate, and this absence warrants an explanation. One can understand the overwhelming focus on mutual withdrawal and resistance to de-escalation when one realizes that many policymakers still believed they would have a negotiated settlement by the end of the year. When President Nixon inquired at the meeting how long the Paris Peace Talks would last, the experienced diplomat Philip Habib responded, “Providing the North sees no flagging in our determination; …a settlement should probably occur this year.”

De-escalation and unilateral withdrawal would send the wrong message to Hanoi. As a result of the March 28 meeting, Nixon decided that there would “be no de-escalation except as an outgrowth of mutual troop withdrawal.” Nevertheless, an unspoken outcome of the meeting was the decision to make a token withdrawal of U.S. troops as early as July, assuming no drastic changes in the situation in Vietnam. It would be up to Laird to make American troop withdrawals a part of a broader plan.

Fortunately for Laird, several developments spun out of the NSC meeting that allowed him to continue his Vietnamization planning and ultimately implement it after receiving presidential approval. Nixon commissioned studies on a phased withdrawal of American forces and the development of a timetable for Vietnamizing the war. More importantly, RN stipulated that there be two separate studies on phased withdrawal: one

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241 Ibid., 6:169.
considering conditions of mutual withdrawal and the other examining redeployment as a consequence of Vietnamizing the war.\textsuperscript{244}

The president naturally assigned Vietnamization’s most ardent advocate the studies on Vietnamization. National Security Study Memorandum 36 initiated “the preparation of a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war,” but it also gave the Secretary of Defense responsibility “for the overall planning and implementation of this process, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of Intelligence.”\textsuperscript{245} As public and private negotiations with North Vietnam failed to secure mutual withdrawal, the power delegated to Laird because of this memo increased dramatically. Vietnamization became America’s exit strategy from Vietnam, and Laird was most often responsible for determining the size and timing of the troop redeployments.

While the section delineating the Secretary of Defense’s responsibilities would become the most important in the document, NSSM 36 also elaborated the key assumptions inherent in a timetable for Vietnamization. It would have to assume that its implementation would occur “with current North Vietnamese and Vietcong force levels,” and that the planners would adjust these levels to match incoming intelligence estimates. The timetable would base overall Allied strength on projected South Vietnamese force levels, and the program would give “the highest national priorities for the equipping and training of South Vietnamese forces.” The timetable would also assume no de-escalation in the war except what derived from phased withdrawals not compensated by increases in


ARVN strength. Finally, the memo instructed Laird to schedule the first redeployment for July 1, 1969 and then create timetables for alternative completion dates ranging from December 31, 1970 to December 31, 1972. Given the previous planning already done by Laird and his Vietnam Task Group, the Secretary of Defense had prepared himself well for this task.246

Historian and former policymaker William Bundy accurately identified March 1969 as the “month of decision.”247 If indecision characterized Nixon’s first two months in office, then March events galvanized the president. Laird’s trip to Vietnam and subsequent report, conversations with past and present political leaders, and that month’s policy meetings, all worked together to persuade Nixon to make several important decisions. First, Nixon acted on his campaign rhetoric by deciding that ARVN improvements would be an appropriate symbol to justify the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops. Policymakers would cease to espouse the status of pacification, enemy offensives, and peace negotiations as public considerations for unilateral withdrawal. Second, the United States would make a withdrawal of troops sometime in early July to demonstrate the war’s progress to the American people. RN and his advisers hoped this move would assuage public opinion and buy them time as they escalated their diplomatic and military campaigns. Third, Nixon commissioned studies on Vietnamization and mutual withdrawal. Like the Johnson administration before it, the Nixon White House continued to hope for a mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and American soldiers, however Nixon broke away from this diplomatic paradigm by authorizing high-level

246 Ibid., 196.
247 Bundy, A Tangled Web, 66.
planning for Vietnamization. Overall, these three decisions gave Laird the precedents and the power he needed to implement Vietnamization.

With the bureaucratic wheels set in motion, the Nixon administration began preparing to make their decisions public. From start to finish, Nixon’s purpose for unilaterally removing a small contingent of troops was to placate the public. For this reason, Nixon and his staff kept the deliberations secret. They hoped the bigger the surprise, the bigger the public relations windfall.

Events prompted Nixon to deliver his first nationally televised address on Vietnam on May 14, but in it, the president refrained from giving away how close the administration was to deciding on troop withdrawals. Nixon and Kissinger had been working on the speech for about a month when the National Liberation Front announced their plan to end the war peacefully. This apparent peace overture coupled with domestic demands to know Nixon’s planning encouraged the president to make a public address. Yet, intrigue within the administration provided an even more compelling reason for Nixon to speak out on May 14. Rogers was eager to announce his own peace plan, and Nixon feared that the State Department would leak Rogers’s proposal, which was more conciliatory than Nixon’s position. Reflecting dovish sentiment in the State Department and Congress, Rogers was willing to accept many of the NLF’s bargaining points if it would lead to a negotiated settlement. Nixon felt that this compromise would conflict with his goal of ending the war in such a way as to preserve the Republic of Vietnam. Thus, the president’s speech was an attempt to alleviate domestic and international

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concerns while preventing members of his Cabinet from making their own declarations on how to end the war.249

Nixon’s address focused on the Paris peace negotiations, avoiding almost any indication that the administration would shortly initiate a unilateral troop withdrawal program. After seeing a draft of the speech, Laird urged the president to include some reference to their efforts to bring U.S. troops home apart from success in Paris.250 Nixon acquiesced and told the American people “that progress in the training program has been excellent and that, apart from any developments that may occur in the negotiations in Paris, the time is approaching when the South Vietnamese forces will be able to take over some of the fighting fronts now being manned by Americans.”251 This indirect reference to Vietnamization was all that the nascent program received in Nixon’s first major address on Vietnam. Instead, the speech reflected Nixon’s belief that his administration would soon end the conflict through a combination of military pressure and negotiations, making a systematic program of unilateral withdrawal unnecessary. The speech’s failure to illicit widespread domestic support for Nixon’s peace efforts put additional pressure on the administration to begin deescalating the Vietnam War, though.

Despite the Nixon administration’s conviction that the May 14 speech represented the most comprehensive American peace plan to date, historian Robert Dallek correctly

notes that “hindsight demonstrates how unimportant the speech was.” Not only did the speech fail to bring an immediate settlement to the conflict, but it also proved unsuccessful at assuaging domestic critics. In particular, dovish Democrats in Congress stepped up their pressure on the White House by proposing a ceasefire and the simultaneous withdrawal of 100,000 U.S. troops. Although the speech slightly boosted public support for Nixon’s policies, nearly sixty percent of Americans continued to believe that it was time to begin monthly reductions of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Circumstances being what they were, the Nixon administration had to decide when the president would announce the first troop withdrawals as well as the number of soldiers they would redeploy.

There was no unanimity of opinion on any of these factors within the administration. Although he wanted an initial redeployment of 50,000 troops, Laird worked with the Pentagon to arrive at a number that would not jeopardize the war effort in South Vietnam. These negotiations reduced the proposed number to 35,000, but Kissinger, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the State Department considered this number still too high. Kissinger and State worried that a large reduction would hurt their bargaining position, and despite General Abrams’s support for the redeployment of 50,000 men, the JCS feared that the loss of even 35,000 soldiers would retard progress in the ground war. Conversely, Laird believed that without a sizable withdrawal, Congressional and

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domestic opinion would quickly turn against the war. Nevertheless, the four parties finally agreed on an initial reduction of 25,000 military personnel.\(^{255}\)

The decision to make the announcement at Nixon’s scheduled June 8 meeting with President Thieu at Midway also encountered resistance. Ambassador Bunker in particular urged Nixon to wait another month, as this delay would give Thieu time to complete several pacification programs and demonstrate greater progress towards Vietnamization.\(^{256}\) By May 21, Nixon had decided to make the announcement at Midway, though. Nixon reasoned that continued speculation about an impending withdrawal was reducing the potential impact the surprise announcement could make. Overall, Nixon saw Midway as an opportunity to shore up domestic support for the Thieu government while using the troop withdrawal as a means to undercut those groups within America calling for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces.\(^{257}\)

After the president had made his decision, Laird quickly set out to finalize his Vietnamization policy. The completed version, National Security Study Memorandum 36, concluded that withdrawal planning should remain flexible with 25,000 troops withdrawn initially. Furthermore, the report stated that the timetable for withdrawal must take into account the progress of improvements in the South Vietnamese military. Laird believed that the implementation of this plan would hurt North Vietnamese confidence because it demonstrated that the United States was not going to abandon South Vietnam and that overall allied military strength would remain strong after U.S. redeployments.

\(^{255}\) Interview with Melvin Laird by Tom Wells, p. 2-3; and Selin, “Vietnamization,” 19.
Likewise, Laird thought that Vietnamization would convince the South Vietnamese that America remained committed to their defense and would therefore boost morale in that country. Finally, Laird believed that the announcement of troop withdrawals would encourage important elements of the American population, particularly members of Congress, to continue to support the war.258

This planning culminated at the Midway conference. President Nixon arrived at Midway Island on June 8 to meet with President Thieu and subsequently announce the beginning of troop withdrawals. Reiterating his concern over the U.S. political climate, Nixon told Thieu that “the U.S. domestic situation is a weapon in the war.” Thieu commented that he understood Nixon’s plight and that South Vietnam would work to facilitate the withdrawal of American forces. Having secured Thieu’s approval in person, Nixon announced the first redeployment of U.S. troops.259

As expected, Americans reacted favorably to the news that the Nixon administration would remove 25,000 U.S. troops by August 31, 1969. One New York Times journalist summed up the nation’s reaction when he wrote, “President Nixon has undoubtedly bought more time for his strategy with the American people.” The writer went on to temper this assessment by adding that the numbers were “so modest and the time period for the first withdrawal so short that [the president] must…face the issue of

more withdrawals very soon.” The announcement bought Nixon time; just how much time remained uncertain.260

Thanks to Laird’s efforts, Nixon’s election-year rhetoric became reality in 1969. In 1968, Nixon had campaigned on American redeployments based on increasing the strength of South Vietnamese forces but he entered the White House without a plan to accomplish this goal. Conversely, Laird assumed his cabinet post with a clear vision of Vietnamizing the war. In early 1969, Laird worked tirelessly to develop Vietnamization into a workable policy and then convince military leaders and President Nixon to adopt his plan. Nixon’s formal announcement of unilateral withdrawals symbolized Laird’s early success at defining U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam. Yet, Laird’s victory was short lived.

Within the Nixon administration, a bureaucratic conflict was emerging. Having lost the first battle over Vietnam policy, Henry Kissinger was now determined to vanquish Vietnamization. In the months following Midway, a bitter struggle between Laird and Kissinger characterized the Nixon administration as the pair fought to define Nixon’s foreign policies in Vietnam. With increasing domestic pressure for more troop withdrawals and the administration’s divisions over Vietnam, the second half of 1969 would determine whether Vietnamization would remain an integral part of America’s strategy to end Vietnam War.

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“[Nixon] thought that he could ride it out and, of course, Henry was always pushing him one way and I was pushing him the other way.” ~ Melvin Laird

Richard Nixon’s announcement of troop withdrawals at Midway Island gave the impression that Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird had won the battle for American foreign policy in Vietnam. Based on Laird’s Vietnamization policy, more U.S. soldiers would come home as the South Vietnamese grew stronger. By instituting a policy of unilateral de-escalation, the Nixon administration appeared to understand the domestic mood, buying them time to achieve their goals in South Vietnam. Laird’s strategy did not please every American policymaker, though.

Between Midway and Nixon’s November 3 “silent majority” address on Vietnam, Henry Kissinger made a concerted effort to stop Vietnamization and replace it with a more aggressive foreign policy. Kissinger believed Vietnamization could not end the war on terms beneficial to America’s interests. Instead, he saw it as a thinly disguised policy of unilateral withdrawal that would ultimately abandon the Republic of Vietnam to communism, weakening the efficacy of U.S. foreign policy abroad. Therefore, he began developing a plan to compel the North Vietnamese to negotiate an end to the war in 1969. Duck Hook was Kissinger’s belligerent alternative to Vietnamization. Kissinger proposed that the administration make the most generous concessions possible to North

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261 “Interview of Melvin R. Laird,” Matloff and Goldberg, 10.
Vietnam and then give them a deadline to accept these terms. If Hanoi still refused to bargain, then Kissinger stated the United States would “give Hanoi incentive to negotiate a compromise settlement through a series of blows.” In short, the administration would use an intense air and naval offensive against North Vietnam to break the diplomatic deadlock.262

Kissinger and Nixon seriously considered Duck Hook, and it might have come to fruition had it not been for domestic and foreign circumstances. Although Laird remained oblivious to their war planning until early October, his efforts helped steer Nixon away from Duck Hook. Furthermore, antiwar protests that same month lent credence to Laird’s arguments against Duck Hook and for Vietnamization while political developments within Hanoi made it an inopportune time to strike North Vietnam. Together these events led to Nixon’s rejection of Duck Hook and his decision to leave Vietnamization as America’s principal foreign policy in Vietnam.

Between Midway and September 1, Laird continued to develop withdrawal planning, but within the administration, a determined opposition to Vietnamization was forming. Unbeknownst to Laird, Kissinger began developing tougher military and diplomatic policies, which he urged the president to adopt. With two of his key advisors differing on Vietnam, Nixon straddled the fence between Vietnamization and escalation. Nixon’s summer of indecision resulted in public praise for Vietnamization and private threats of dramatic military escalation against North Vietnam. These developments set

262 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 284; and Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, October 2, 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 6:419.
the stage for the bitter autumn struggle between Kissinger and Laird over Vietnamization.263

The administration’s first test after Midway came from former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford’s July Foreign Affairs article on Vietnam. In the article, Clifford described the evolution of his views on the war from fervent supporter to cautious dove but also provided his own prescription to end the conflict. Clifford wrote that America’s goal should be the gradual disengagement of U.S. troops while modernizing the South Vietnamese army and continuing to provide American air support. After Nixon’s statements on Vietnamization in 1968 and his announcement of troop withdrawals at Midway, these pronouncements seemed identical to the Republican administration’s stated policy. Yet, Clifford went beyond Nixon’s declared plan by calling for the withdrawal of 100,000 troops by year’s end with the remainder of U.S. forces out of Vietnam by the end of 1970. Unlike Laird’s flexible program, Clifford proposed that the United States should unilaterally withdraw troops “in accordance with a definite schedule and with a specific end point.” Thus, Clifford argued that Nixon’s Vietnamization program was vague and that it withdrew troops too slowly.264

President Nixon responded to Clifford’s article in a June 19 news conference. The president not only criticized Clifford for failing to initiate troop withdrawals during his tenure as Secretary of Defense but also expressed a desire to outdo Clifford’s proposal. Nixon declared, “As far as how many will be withdrawn by the end of this year, or the end of next year, I would hope that we could beat Mr. Clifford’s timetable,  

263 Kimball, The Vietnam War Files, 22.
just as I think we have done a little better than he did when he was in charge of our national defense.” Nixon’s assertion that he hoped to exceed Clifford’s plan rested on his persistent belief that he would end the Vietnam War in his first year in office.265

Kissinger feared that the president’s statements jeopardized that outcome, though. Kissinger had always considered unilateral troop withdrawals a bad policy, and Nixon’s avowal to have more than 100,000 troops out by the end of the year only intensified the National Security Advisor’s angst. Nixon’s Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, noted that the press conference “shook [Kissinger] pretty badly.” Haldeman correctly discerned that Nixon’s statements were an attempt to “hit back at Clifford” but he could not assuage Kissinger’s concern that the president had made a major diplomatic blunder. Kissinger later wrote that after the news conference, “Our insistence on mutual withdrawal was by then drained of virtually any plausibility. Our commitment to unilateral withdrawal had come to be seen, at home, abroad, and particularly in Vietnam, as irreversible.”266

Contrary to this retrospective analysis, RN’s remarks only briefly depressed Kissinger; they did not convince him to abandon his attempts to change U.S. policy in Vietnam. Instead, Kissinger stepped up his efforts to halt Vietnamization and bring powerful military pressure against North Vietnam to force a negotiated settlement. Of course, such a policy confronted presidential indecision and open opposition from other members of


266 Kissinger, White House Years, 275.
the Cabinet, and these themes came out in the July 7 NSC Executive Committee meeting aboard the presidential yacht, the *Sequoia*.  

The day of the meeting, Kissinger sent Nixon a memo warning that the administration might soon have to choose between Vietnamization and political negotiations. Although Kissinger’s memo indicated he favored an accelerated Vietnamization program over emphasis on political negotiations, he observed that both courses were fraught with risk. In Kissinger’s estimation, accelerated withdrawals would undermine South Vietnamese confidence in the Thieu government while bolstering Hanoi’s belief that they could wait out the United States. Additionally, premature redeployments would not give the South Vietnamese military enough time to train and equip enough forces to fill the gap left by their American counterparts. Kissinger concluded that Nixon should not make a decision on further withdrawals at the *Sequoia* meeting but defer his judgment until early August. Meanwhile, successful negotiations depended on the enemy’s willingness to negotiate, and allied concessions could jeopardize the survival of the Republic of Vietnam. Kissinger was clearly preparing President Nixon to move in a third direction: military escalation designed to secure a negotiated settlement. On the day of the memo and the NSC meeting, Haldeman recorded that Kissinger “wants to push for some escalation, enough to get us a reasonable bargain for a settlement within six months.”  

Unfortunately for Kissinger, de-escalation rather than escalation dominated discussions on the *Sequoia*.  

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The principal topic on the *Sequoia* was the apparent lull in the ground war. Basing their judgment on the lower than expected allied casualty rates, U.S. policymakers believed North Vietnamese and NLF forces had reduced the level of violence in South Vietnam. Yet, this trend raised several questions. Recalling their confusion over the matter, Kissinger wrote, “Did [the lull] result from Hanoi’s exhaustion, from a new negotiating strategy, or from an attempt by Hanoi to achieve de-escalation by tacit understandings?” Regardless of North Vietnam’s intentions, the Nixon administration had to demonstrate its willingness to reciprocate or face public criticism for not responding to the enemy’s ostensible desire to ease tensions. As a result, the group, which included Laird, decided to change the mission statement for American troops in Vietnam from defeating and forcing the withdrawal of enemy forces to one that accented Vietnamization as the primary means of preserving South Vietnam.

Although General Abrams had begun moving in this direction in 1968, the decision marked another victory for those forces within the Nixon administration favoring disengagement. The mission statement was more of a formality than a tactical guide, but for Laird, it represented another sign that the Nixon administration was deescalating the war. In a telephone conversation with Kissinger the next day, Laird expressed his pleasure with the meeting’s outcome. Hinting at things to come, Kissinger responded, “For his own use, the President has not excluded the possibility that he could take an option to the right [i.e. military escalation] in order to end the war quickly.”

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270 Nixon, Laird, Rogers, Kissinger, Wheeler, Attorney General John Mitchell, and General Robert Cushman (Deputy CIA Director) attended this special session.
Indeed, Kissinger left the *Sequoia* meeting more determined than ever to develop an alternative policy based on military escalation, not disengagement.\(^{273}\)

As Kissinger’s aide, Anthony Lake recalled, “Plans for escalating the war were always lying on the shelf,”\(^{274}\) and the military completed what became Kissinger’s “option to the right” on July 20. Sometime before this date, the chief of naval operations, Admiral Thomas Moorer, secretly authorized his staff to revamp an earlier plan for an air and naval campaign against North Vietnam. It is still unclear whether or not Moorer acted at Kissinger’s behest, but Moorer hid these escalatory machinations from Secretary Laird. Unlike Johnson-era bombing campaigns, this planning called for rapid, dramatic escalation with air raids decimating North Vietnam’s war-making capability and naval forces blockading the nation. Moorer’s proposal, Pruning Knife, satisfied the military component of Kissinger’s strategy and it became the centerpiece of Duck Hook.\(^{275}\)

By the end of July, Kissinger’s staff had a rough sketch of this policy, and an August 5 memo rehearsed this alternative. Should Hanoi continue to prove intransigent at the bargaining table, the administration would quietly halt troop withdrawals while delivering veiled threats to the North Vietnamese negotiators. If these measures failed to elicit a favorable response, the United States would use military escalation to “induce the other side to negotiate or erase their impression that time is on their side.” With a formal

\(^{273}\) Conversation noted in editor’s footnote #2 *FRUS*, 1969-1976, January 1969 to July 1970, 6:283; italics in original


\(^{275}\) Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 159.
alternative to Vietnamization in hand, Kissinger only needed the president’s blessing to begin its implementation.276

Kissinger had little trouble securing Nixon’s support for a more hawkish foreign policy. Nixon later wrote that July was the month he “decided to ‘go for broke’ in the sense that [he] would attempt to end the war one way or the other- either by negotiated agreement or by an increased use of force.” Whereas Laird believed that domestic pressure made it impossible to continue the war at even the present level of violence, Nixon reasoned that he had a brief window of opportunity to begin escalating the war before the universities and Congress resumed in the fall. After this point, antiwar sentiment would swell, curtailing his ability to prosecute an expanded war. Thus, Nixon initiated the first stages of Kissinger’s policy in early August and set November 1, 1969 as a deadline for North Vietnamese compliance.277

On August 4, Henry Kissinger had his first clandestine meeting with North Vietnamese negotiators. At this Paris meeting, Kissinger emphasized U.S. concessions and a willingness to negotiate but he also introduced the November 1 ultimatum. The National Security Adviser stressed the significance of this date (the one-year anniversary of Johnson’s bombing halt) throughout the meeting. Kissinger told the North Vietnamese negotiator, Xuan Thuy, “If by November 1, no major progress has been made toward a solution, we will be compelled-with great reluctance-to take measures of the greatest consequences.” Xuan Thuy met these veiled threats by reaffirming his country’s willingness to continue fighting. The North Vietnamese delegation remained steadfast in

their demands for a prompt, unilateral withdrawal of all American forces from South Vietnam and the creation of a provisional government that did not include Thieu. Nonetheless, Kissinger “had delivered Nixon’s ultimatum, allowing the administration to proceed with the next stage of its escalatory policy.”

On August 23, Nixon released a statement announcing that he had deferred a decision on more troop withdrawals until sometime in September. The ostensible reason was Hanoi’s recent intensification of the ground war in South Vietnam, where hostilities had been waning until a new offensive began in August. Like most observers, *New York Times* journalist Neil Sheehan saw through Nixon’s rhetoric and identified his real reason for delaying Vietnamization. On August 24, Sheehan gave his opinion “that the president hoped by a display of toughness on his own part to nudge the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong into concessions at Paris.” Indeed, the delay completed the second part of Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy. By postponing troop withdrawals, Nixon signaled his willingness to halt Vietnamization and escalate the war if North Vietnam did not make significant concessions by the November 1 deadline.

As Nixon and Kissinger moved towards an expanded conflict, Secretary Laird continued to deescalate the American role in the ground war. At the *Sequoia* meeting, the administration had decided to change the mission statement to reflect a Vietnamization strategy, but Kissinger’s memoir indicates that Nixon had second

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thoughts and attempted to countermand the order before the new mission statement went
into effect on August 15. Unfortunately for Nixon and Kissinger, Laird had already
issued the formal order unilaterally. Laird also publicly announced this change. In a late
August speech, Laird stated that Vietnamization was the Defense Department’s “top
priority” and that U.S. forces were moving towards a supportive role in South
Vietnam. As the month of August ended, Laird’s Vietnamization and Kissinger’s
Duck Hook planning were clearly on a collision course, but Laird was unaware of this
impending conflict.

Nixon and Kissinger made a concerted effort to keep Laird out of the secret
negotiations and Duck Hook planning. In an August 5 telephone call, the pair “agreed
not to tell Laird about the meeting in Paris” between Xuan Thuy and Kissinger. In
doing so, they also kept the November 1 deadline from the Secretary of Defense.
Similarly, they anticipated Laird’s resistance to Duck Hook and successfully collaborated
to keep him in the dark. Although Laird was using his many contacts, particularly in the
Army Signal Corps, to monitor White House deliberations and conversations, he did not
learn about Duck Hook until late September. For once, Laird had lost the initiative to
Kissinger. September was a month of behind the scenes planning as Kissinger raced to
stop Vietnamization before Laird learned of this plot.

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280 Melvin R. Laird, “Improvement of the Vietnamese Forces and Vietnamization,” August 21,
281 Kissinger, White House Years, 276; and Selin, “Vietnamization,” 20.
282 Notes of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National
283 Dallek, Nixon and Kissinger, 155.
Oblivious to these developments, Laird continued to focus on Vietnamization, and on September 4, he issued a memo that recommended accelerating the withdrawal program. In it, Laird proposed the adoption of a 24-month schedule to withdraw half of the American personnel in South Vietnam, leaving a residual force of around 267,500 men. In June, Laird had agreed with the Joint Chiefs that even a 42-month timetable would interrupt pacification and that a faster withdrawal “could result in serious setbacks to the pacification program, a significant decline in allied military capability, and the possibility of a GVN collapse.”

Now in September, Laird suddenly supported a much faster withdrawal program, leading one to wonder what precipitated this about face.

It was certainly not the dynamics on the ground that had changed Laird’s stance, but the Joint Chief’s willingness to accept an accelerated withdrawal. Laird entered the Nixon administration with the desire to redeploy U.S. forces from Vietnam quickly and completely. Yet, these policies ran counter to sentiment within the military and the White House, and so Laird often proposed policies different from what he was actually developing. For instance, Laird told his aides, “I want this [withdrawal program] to [leave] zero [U.S. troops] on the ground,” but as evidenced in the September 4 memo, he voiced his support for a large residual force when addressing likely opponents of his policies. In sum, Laird only proposed what he believed he could sell to the JCS and President Nixon. Meanwhile, he left timetables flexible so that he could accelerate them as domestic pressures mounted or as the hawks became more malleable. When in late

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285 Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, September 4, 1969, ibid., 358-359.
August the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle Wheeler, threw his support behind the 24-month schedule, Laird pounced on the opportunity to accelerate Vietnamization. In this manner, Laird skillfully avoided a row with the military while advancing his vision of Vietnam policy.286

In addition to accelerating U.S. withdrawal, Laird’s September 4 memo proposed a radical reorientation in Vietnamization policy. Antecedents of Laird’s Vietnamization assumed a mutual withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces, leaving South Vietnam to grapple with only the Vietcong. Indeed, few military experts believed that the Republic of Vietnam could withstand both the North Vietnamese army and NLF without significant U.S. aid and military support. By late summer 1969, Laird was openly challenging this assumption. Laird believed that the insurgency was a diminishing threat whereas ARVN forces were growing increasingly stronger. Therefore, Laird announced in his memo that the Defense Department was “now considering the feasibility of expanding the [Vietnamization] program to prepare the [South Vietnamese armed forces] to meet a combined VC/NVA threat.” This planning was consistent with Laird’s desire to develop an exit strategy that was not predicated on the negotiated withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces but it represented a significant departure from past policies. For Laird, Vietnamization constituted the most practical way of ending the U.S. ground war before domestic circumstances necessitated a pullout. The United States

286 Laird Interview with Tom Wells, 5 (italics in original); and memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, September 4, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:358, 362.
could train and equip the South Vietnamese army to withstand its enemies but it could not perpetually send its sons to fight alongside them.\textsuperscript{287}

Kissinger, on the other hand, saw Vietnamization as the wrong strategy for quickly ending the war, and savagely attacked Laird’s program in a series of September memos. In a note to President Nixon, Kissinger restated American analysts’ history of being unduly optimistic about the situation in South Vietnam and then suggested that policymakers were now deluding themselves on the progress of strengthening ARVN forces.\textsuperscript{288} In a September 10 memo to the president, the National Security Advisor was even more candid about his pessimism towards Vietnamization. Kissinger doubted that the South Vietnamese could fill the gaps left by redeployed U.S. soldiers, especially if domestic sentiment necessitated a faster withdrawal schedule. Kissinger also believed that Vietnamization encouraged North Vietnam to “wait us out” rather than “make real concessions in Paris.” Most important of all, Kissinger did not buy into the notion that Laird’s policy alleviated tension at home. Kissinger wrote, “I do not believe that ‘Vietnamization’ can significantly reduce the pressures for an end to the war, and may, in fact, increase them after a certain point.” He explained,

Withdrawal of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public: The more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded. This could eventually result, in effect, in demands for unilateral withdrawal—perhaps within a year.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{287} Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, September 4, 1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:360-362.
\item \textsuperscript{288} Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, September 5, 1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:367-368.
\end{itemize}
For Kissinger, time was running out for the Nixon administration to end the Vietnam War, but Vietnamization only sped up the clock. The president would have to employ other means if he wanted a decisive victory.²⁸⁹

The following day, Kissinger outlined Nixon’s options as he saw them. The president could maintain the current strategy, accelerate negotiations, accelerate Vietnamization, or escalate militarily while halting Vietnamization as a means to a negotiated settlement. Kissinger then proceeded to delineate the problems associated with the first three options. The present policy did not resolve the fact that time was working against American objectives. Negotiations assumed North Vietnam was willing to settle the war and that the South Vietnamese government would accept a compromise settlement. Finally, Kissinger believed “accelerated Vietnamization would be a road to swift disaster,” possibly undermining the Thieu government and giving the appearance that America was abandoning South Vietnam. It is telling that Kissinger did not list the negatives associated with the fourth option, military escalation. Kissinger simply noted that others were addressing that alternative’s problems. Indeed, Kissinger and his staff had been pouring over Duck Hook planning as he sought to establish military escalation as the president’s policy.²⁹⁰

On September 12, the National Security Council convened to decide on the troop withdrawals Nixon had postponed in August, but the policymakers spent much of the meeting discussing the administration’s options in Vietnam. Very few council members

²⁸⁹ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, September 10, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:371-373.
²⁹⁰ Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, September 11, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:376, 383, 386, 388, 390; and quote noted in editor’s footnote #3 FRUS, 1969-1976, 6: 376.
were aware of Kissinger’s Duck Hook planning or his recent memos to the president. Nonetheless, Nixon used the meeting as a sounding board for the various alternatives.

The prospects of accelerated negotiations appeared particularly grim. American diplomat Philip Habib told the president, the North Vietnamese “have adopted a strategy of waiting us out.” Hanoi’s demands for an unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces and a coalition government in Saigon were incompatible with America’s objectives, and North Vietnam only reacted to U.S. concessions with further intransigence. According to Secretary Rogers, North Vietnam reaped a public relations and propaganda bonanza by keeping the negotiations open, and so the charade continued with little hope of making real diplomatic progress.291

With the Paris negotiations at a standstill, Nixon carefully surveyed the NSC’s thoughts on military escalation “with all targets open.” Generals Abrams and Wheeler openly questioned the effectiveness of a dramatic offensive against North Vietnam. Kissinger was incredulous. “There is nothing that can hurt them?” Kissinger asked. Abrams replied, “They can carry on.” To which Wheeler added, “There would be no fatal blow through seeking a no-holds-barred solution in a couple of weeks.” With two of America’s top generals having summarily dismissed escalation, the council moved on to other issues.292

Vietnamization was the final topic of discussion. With the American public and Congress feeling confident that the administration was moving forward on Vietnam, Nixon felt it imperative that the administration publicly outline its withdrawal planning.

292 Ibid., 398-399.
Secretary Laird agreed that they should act on troop withdrawals before “the home front erupts” but argued that giving firm figures and timetables would be a mistake. The others concurred in this assessment, and the administration decided to continue its flexible approach to Vietnamization with Nixon announcing the next reduction the following week.  

Perhaps because of the generals’ negative response to possible military escalation, Kissinger’s detailed criticisms of Vietnamization did not come out in the meeting. At one point, Kissinger exclaimed, “We need a plan to end the war, not only to withdraw troops,” but he did not follow up this outburst with an elaboration of his own plans to win the war. Vietnamization remained unchallenged there, and so the meeting constituted a major setback for Kissinger. Nonetheless, he continued working on Duck Hook.

Although President Nixon announced on September 16 that the administration would withdraw 35,000 more troops by the year’s end, this statement did not preclude a Duck Hook-like offensive around the November 1, 1969 ultimatum. The inability to halt Vietnamization certainly demoralized Kissinger, and resignations on his staff that same month weakened his ability to push his agenda in the White House. Nevertheless, Nixon’s announcement could serve as another justification for bombing North Vietnam. In addition to U.S. troop reductions, Nixon enumerated his administration’s efforts to end the war peacefully. In short, the United States was willing and ready to settle the conflict so long as there was a mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and American forces and South Vietnam had the right of self-determination. Nixon concluded, “The time has

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293 Ibid., 6:401-404.
294 Ibid., 404.
295 Dallek, Nixon and Kissinger, 156.
come to end this war. Let history record that at this critical moment, both sides turned
their faces toward peace rather than toward conflict and war.” With the November 1
deadline on the horizon, Nixon and Kissinger wanted it known that they had made every
effort for peace, and if carrots refused to entice the North Vietnamese, then they were not
afraid to brandish the stick.296

As indicated by a September 27 draft of the planned November 3 speech, Nixon
and Kissinger were dead serious about Duck Hook. Although the administration did not
announce the speech until October 13, Nixon had planned to give an address shortly after
the ultimatum had passed. The president was to deliver the speech after the United States
had taken “swift, concentrated, and punishing” military action against North Vietnam.
Nixon would remind the American people of his administration’s peace overtures while
blaming Hanoi for attempting to wait out the United States, “prolonging this tragic war.”
Nixon would then warn, “Further intransigence by [North Vietnamese] leaders would
only compound their agony.” Although presidents have speeches prepared for many
different contingencies, Kissinger fully intended to make this one more than a rhetorical
artifact.297

On October 2, the National Security Adviser provided the president with the most
detailed memo to date on an escalatory alternative to Vietnamization. As conceived by
Kissinger, Duck Hook would hit a wide range of strategic targets within North Vietnam

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available from John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project [online] (Santa
Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database), no date), available at
and initiate a blockade of that nation. This air and naval campaign would in turn have a psychological impact on the communist leadership, bringing “them to serious negotiations and an honorable settlement.” The memo then listed probable targets and predicted North Vietnamese, Soviet, and Chinese reactions to the offensive. Kissinger’s machinations were quickly becoming a viable policy alternative, but it was at this point that Laird learned of Duck Hook and made a concerted effort to stop it.298

Despite Laird’s myriad of political and bureaucratic connections in Washington, he did not hear about Duck Hook until sometime in early October. Laird only learned about it after Nixon disclosed to congressional Republicans on September 30 that he was seriously considering military escalation to end the war. Knowing that the congressional representatives would leak like a sieve, Nixon used the meeting to send a message to Hanoi, but his brazenness shocked his audience. An anonymous Republican recalled, the president’s talk “scared the hell out of me.”299 Afterwards, word of Nixon’s willingness to bomb and mine North Vietnam quickly spread inside the Beltway. It was then that Laird learned of the impending offensive against North Vietnam.300

Laird immediately went on the offensive against Duck Hook. Although Kissinger was advocating a plan virtually identical to the air and naval offensive Laird had called for in the early 1960s, Laird understood that domestic sentiment would no longer tolerate renewed and expanded escalation. The opportunity for that strategy passed with the large-scale commitment of U.S. troops in 1965 and the widespread decline of popular

298 Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, October 2, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:419-420.
300 Nixon, RN, 400.
support for the war thereafter. By 1967, Laird believed it was time to begin deescalating the war. For Laird, Vietnamization could both deescalate the war and preserve South Vietnam so long as Kissinger did not delude the president into taking dramatic military action.\(^{301}\)

On October 8, Laird sent the president a memo criticizing the JCS-Kissinger proposal. Laird warned, “The plan would involve the U.S. in expanded costs and risks with no clear resultant military or political benefits.” Laird supplemented his critique with CIA analysis arguing that the operation would have a minimal impact on the fighting in South Vietnam and that it would exacerbate international tensions between the United States and the communist world. Instead, Laird believed sticking with Vietnamization was the only domestically feasible option and that it would end the war without employing extensive military assets.\(^{302}\)

Although Kissinger characterized Laird’s pessimistic evaluation of Duck Hook as a “smorgasbord of speculations, assertions and evidence,” Laird’s protests affected Nixon.\(^{303}\) The political consequences of a falling out between the president and his secretary of defense were more persuasive than Laird’s strategic critique of escalation, though. RN feared Laird would resign should he choose to escalate the war. The resignation of one of the administration’s most outspoken moderates on Vietnam would reveal that Nixon had abandoned de-escalation and the search for a peaceful end to the

\(^{302}\) Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, undated, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:448-449; and Laird Interview with Tom Wells, 7.
\(^{303}\) Ibid., 6:449.
war. This development would most likely result in a domestic backlash that would intensify pressure for an immediate end to the war. Together, Laird’s faith in Vietnamization and his strong denunciation of Duck Hook caused the president to waver. As Haldeman recorded on October 9, “[Nixon] still is pondering the course. Does not yet rule out K’s plan as a possibility, but does now feel [Vietnamization] is a possibility when he did not think so a month ago.”

Nixon’s indecision continued into the NSC’s October 11 meeting. There, Nixon declared that he would not allow congressional and public opinion to sway his decision making but he acknowledged that domestic sentiment could jeopardize their efforts to end the war. Nixon told the group that he was convinced Vietnamization would work as long as congressional doves did not cut off funding for the war, which was becoming a very real possibility. As one contemporary noted, Congress was in an “anti-military mood,” and even though budget cuts left war funding intact, the day was approaching when Congress might begin doing its own cutting. Although Laird opined that Vietnamization would accomplish its purpose before Congress stopped appropriations, Nixon was still considering a decisive military blow against North Vietnam in order to end the war before U.S. opinion curtailed the administration’s power.

At the meeting, Nixon extended the possibility of a Duck Hook-like operation beyond the November 1 deadline and into late 1970 but he did abandon the option of carrying it out in 1969. Even after General Wheeler criticized Duck Hook for being “militarily unsound because it was too short” to accomplish military objectives, Nixon

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304 Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 163; and Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, 97; italics in original
implied that Wheeler missed the point. The objective of the two-week campaign was to achieve the maximum shock effect in North Vietnam while minimizing civilian casualties and destroying North Vietnam’s ability to wage war. Nixon and Kissinger hoped this shock and awe strategy would break the stalemate in Paris. The president then emphatically instructed Laird, “We must keep the Air and Navy forces available” should Hanoi remain intransigent after the November 1 ultimatum passes. Nixon added that British Prime Minister Harold Wilson would give his support to U.S. policy and that “support overseas for the US was increasing.” As he saw it, “The only ingredient missing is support of public opinion,” but this complication should not force the United States to abandon South Vietnam. Nixon concluded that the administration would continue both Vietnamization and planning for military escalation; Duck Hook was still on the table.\footnote{Ibid., 457-460; italics in original}

The Moratorium magnified domestic sentiment as a foreign policy consideration and increased Nixon’s reservations about implementing Duck Hook in November. Antiwar leaders scheduled the event for Wednesday, October 15 and envisioned it as a decentralized, nationwide mass protest. Rather than employing radical tactics, its planners designed the Moratorium to appeal to moderate Americans. The historian Melvin Small summarized their vision,

> On that day, people would participate in a moratorium from work or school for anywhere from a few minutes to several hours to register their opposition to the continuation of the war at rallies, marches, vigils, prayer sessions, or by leafleting and participating in whatever activities local moratorium committees organized.
Around two million Americans participated in the October Moratorium, and most of them were respectable looking adults who conducted their protests in an orderly, calm fashion. Thus, the Moratorium stood in stark contrast to the youthful, radical protests that had defined much of the antiwar movement. The Moratorium’s respectability and large turnout made it a focal point of media attention. Small has correctly noted, “No other antiwar activity either before or after the October 15 Moratorium was treated so generously and favorably by the [television] networks.” The Moratorium and its coverage reinforced policymakers’ conviction that much of the American public would not tolerate an escalation of the war, and a subsequent Gallup Poll supported this conclusion when it found that 55 percent of Americans considered themselves doves.308

Despite Nixon’s declaration that he would not allow antiwar protests to influence policy, the Moratorium’s success made it more difficult for him to implement Duck Hook. Nixon later wrote that by lending credence to the idea that public opinion limited his options, the Moratorium “had probably destroyed the credibility of my ultimatum to Hanoi.” In doing so, RN believed the moratorium had “destroyed whatever small possibility may have still existed of ending the war in 1969.” Beyond its probable impact on the ultimatum, the Moratorium certainly gave salience to Laird’s domestic arguments for Vietnamization and against escalation. By mid-October, Nixon was leaning away from a November offensive but he was not yet ready to abandon Duck Hook and fully embrace Vietnamization.309

309 Nixon, RN, 399, 401, 403.
With the Moratorium over, the ultimatum and the scheduled November 3 speech loomed on the horizon. Unaware of the ultimatum, media pundits began trying to guess the nature of Nixon’s speech. After the Moratorium, nearly all of them assumed Nixon would announce further de-escalation, particularly a cease-fire or accelerated troop withdrawals. These expectations put increased pressure on the president not to escalate the war. As Haldeman noted, “The main result is a massive buildup of hopes for a major breakthrough in November 3 speech. Problem is there won’t be one, and the letdown will be tremendous.”310

Developments outside the United States also affected the president. The reduced U.S. casualty figures in Vietnam and the recent death of Ho Chi Minh weighed heavily on the president’s mind after October 15. After the August offensive, the ground war entered another lull. The lower number of casualties gave the appearance that the communists were deescalating the war, and should the United States suddenly launch an intense air and naval campaign against North Vietnam, the Nixon administration would look like the aggressor. Additionally, Ho Chi Minh’s death in September led to new leadership in Hanoi and this change could translate into a fresh start at the bargaining table; an opportunity Nixon would lose if he bombed Hanoi. After these developments, Nixon was clearly moving away from Duck Hook, but one final encounter would end Kissinger’s hopes of replacing Vietnamization with a more militant foreign policy in Vietnam.311

310 Nixon, RN, 404; and Haldeman, The Haldeman Diaries, 102.
311 Nixon, RN, 404.
On October 17, President Nixon met with Sir Robert Thompson, the world famous counterinsurgency expert whose tactics had helped the British defeat a communist guerrilla war in Malaya. Nixon and Kissinger were persistent in getting his thoughts on the “option to the right,” escalation. Even though Thompson believed “the future of Western civilization was at stake” in Vietnam, sticking with Vietnamization remained the best course of action. Thompson told the pair “he would rule escalation out” as it would only set U.S. and world opinion against the administration and would not help South Vietnam stand on its own. Even the bold, surgical strike Nixon and Kissinger suggested carried far greater risks than possible benefits. Thompson assured the president that, assuming the South Vietnamese remained confident in the United States, the present Vietnamization policy could result in U.S. victory in two years.\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation, October 17, 1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:462-465.}

As a result of the Thompson meeting and the other October developments, Nixon broke away from Duck Hook. What appeared so attractive in September lost its luster in October. Laird’s criticism and the possibility of his resignation gave Nixon good reason to reevaluate Kissinger’s proposal. The Joint Chiefs’ skepticism of the campaign’s military effectiveness added more clout to Laird’s argument. Meanwhile, the Moratorium reminded Nixon that the American public would not be tolerant towards an expanded conflict, especially when Hanoi appeared to be reducing the ground war’s intensity. Sir Robert Thompson’s assessment reinforced these themes and helped push Nixon over the edge. Nixon later wrote, “[After these events,] I began to think more in terms of stepping up Vietnamization while continuing the fighting at its present level
rather than of trying to increase it.”

In short, Nixon had rejected using the ultimatum as a pretext for an air and naval assault against North Vietnam.

Instead of becoming a viable alternative to Vietnamization, Kissinger’s efforts were quickly becoming nothing more than a contingency plan. With the president’s authorization, Kissinger continued to draw up plans for three, seven, and fourteen-day strikes against North Vietnam. However, Kissinger now predicated their implementation on escalation by the enemy, not diplomatic intransigence. As the month of October drew to a close, Kissinger continued to lambaste Vietnamization. In a memo to the president, the National Security Adviser disagreed with Laird’s assumption that Vietnamization would mitigate public opposition to the war. Kissinger also expressed his doubts about South Vietnam’s ability to replace redeployed U.S. troops. Despite Kissinger’s determination, Vietnamization stood whereas Duck Hook became just another contingency plan.

The final battle over Vietnamization played out in the preparation of Nixon’s November 3 speech. Nixon and Kissinger had originally conceived the speech as a means of justifying military escalation to the American people. With Duck Hook no longer under consideration, the message became a subject of debate within the administration. Secretary Rogers wanted the president to stress the opportunity for peace at the Paris negotiations. Kissinger continued to push for a speech with “a very hard line,” similar to the September draft but with references to the bombing campaign.

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313 Nixon, RN, 405.
314 Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to Secretary of Defense Laird, October 24, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:470-471; and Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, October 30, 1969, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:475-476.
removed. In other words, the speech would proclaim that the communists and public opinion would not bully U.S. policymakers into avoiding the use of military force or abandoning South Vietnam. Still others in the White House wanted the emphasis placed on Nixon’s efforts to deescalate and peacefully end the war apart from the Paris talks.315

Laird was the foremost figure in this camp and his efforts made Vietnamization one of the key elements of Nixon’s address. On October 23, Laird sent Kissinger a memo recommending that Vietnamization’s success be the main theme of the speech.316 Soon thereafter, Laird began playing an active role in the drafting process. Laird told the president, “It is still my firm view that your policy of Vietnamization should occupy the main portion of your remarks and the thrust should be: ‘We have a program; and we are moving.’” Laird’s draft focused on Vietnamization “as the means both to an end and a beginning: an end to the American involvement in Asian combat and the beginning of our new policy for peace in Asia.” By building up the South Vietnamese military while withdrawing U.S. troops, this program would end the Vietnam War without sacrificing America’s objectives in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the draft stressed that Vietnamization was a vital part of Nixon’s policy to defend non-communist Asia with American arms and financial aid rather than with U.S. soldiers. Ultimately, Nixon included many of these arguments in his speech.317

Although best remembered for its appeal for the support of the “great silent majority” of Americans who were not protesting against the war, Nixon’s November 3

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315 Nixon, RN, 407-408.
317 Memorandum For the President with enclosed draft, October 30, 1969, folder “Admin Strategy, 1969-1970 (1),” Box A50, LP.
address established Vietnamization as the administration’s primary foreign policy in Vietnam. Nixon hailed it as “a plan which will bring the war to an end regardless of what happens on the negotiating front.” Contrasting his program with those that would have the United States immediately withdraw from Vietnam, the president reiterated,

[Vietnamization] will withdraw all of our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom. I have chosen this second course. It is not the easy way. It is the right way.

Nixon did make clear that he would “not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with” any attempt by the enemy to take advantage of American withdrawals by launching a new offensive. Nonetheless, his emphasis remained on the administration’s peace overtures and its adoption of Vietnamization as their policy of choice. In essence, the virtual absence of escalatory rhetoric and the positive references to Vietnamization symbolized Laird’s victory over Kissinger. Vietnamization had won.318

It had not been an easy fight. After Midway, Kissinger stepped up his efforts to derail Vietnamization. By September 1969, he had delivered an ultimatum to North Vietnam, persuaded Nixon to postpone troop withdrawals, and developed the outline of what became Duck Hook. During this period, President Nixon clearly favored escalation over Vietnamization. Nixon feared that if he did not soon end the war, public pressure would curtail his ability to achieve peace with honor. Military pressure seemed the surest way to achieve this goal, but Laird’s criticisms of Duck Hook and his faith in Vietnamization began to change the president’s mind. Domestic developments, like the

Moratorium, supplemented Laird’s analysis, as did the advice of Sir Robert Thompson. By the end of October, Nixon had rejected the aggressive air and naval assault against North Vietnam that his National Security Adviser so desperately wanted to implement.

This decision left Vietnamization the undisputed U.S. exit strategy from Vietnam. Nixon’s November 3 speech reflected this reality as it prepared the American people for the long road ahead. Barring a diplomatic breakthrough, Vietnamization would remain administration policy. Laird had won his battle against Kissinger, and it was now up to his policy to extricate the United States from the Vietnamese ground war while preserving the Republic of Vietnam.
Conclusion

Melvin Laird was Vietnamization’s chief architect and supporter within the Nixon administration. No other person was so integral to its creation and subsequent implementation. As negotiations failed and the administration ruled out escalation, policymakers continued withdrawing U.S. forces according to Laird’s Vietnamization. In short, Laird set the course for America’s departure from the ground war in South Vietnam.

As a Republican congressman and an unwavering anticommunist, Melvin Laird articulated many of the ideas that later underpinned his Vietnamization program. In the early 1960s, Laird advocated U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia, but abhorred the idea of troop commitments. Instead, the United States should use the threat of strategic bombing and mining campaigns to deter communist aggression. For Laird, the use of ground forces would only play to the enemy’s strengths and risk another land war in Asia. After Johnson Americanized the Vietnam War in 1965, Laird grew increasingly pessimistic about America’s ability to save the Republic of Vietnam. The deployment of thousands of U.S. soldiers did little to stabilize South Vietnam, and the war’s escalation exacerbated social tensions at home. Yet, Laird remained committed to South Vietnam. By 1968, he was looking for a way to build up the South Vietnamese military so that South Vietnam could protect itself from the Vietcong insurgency without the aid of U.S. ground troops. This concept of dramatically strengthening and modernizing ARVN forces became one of the twin pillars of Laird’s Vietnamization.
Laird adopted the other pillar, unilateral withdrawal, in the crucible of 1968’s events. That an ardent anticommunist, so committed to South Vietnam, would later advocate the unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops from that country seems antithetical. This development had much to do with Laird’s longstanding aversion to American troop deployments in Third World guerilla wars but it also had a lot to do with the context of 1968. For policymakers like Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, the Tet Offensive and the public reaction to it reinforced the idea that the United States could not win the Vietnam War militarily in the limited time the American people would give them. The year’s dramatic protests and riots heightened policymakers’ concern, catalyzing their efforts to find a way to deescalate the war. Election-year politics made Vietnam policy all the more important, and with Nixon and Laird’s guidance, the Republican Party evaluated the domestic context as they formulated their party platform and presidential election strategy. The result was a proposed policy of gradual de-escalation: the withdrawal of U.S. soldiers as the South Vietnamese improved their military capacity.

Although the Nixon campaign fused the two elements of Vietnamization, it was up to Laird to turn campaign rhetoric into a viable policy. Nixon and Kissinger began 1969 confident that their diplomatic skills would allow them to negotiate an end to the war that year. Nixon believed that Vietnamization could work as one component of his overall strategy as well as a political ploy, but it was always peripheral to negotiations.319 Always the pessimist, Laird worked on making Vietnamization a plan that would continue to operate even if negotiations broke down. Laird moved quickly on Vietnam policy and by the end of March, he had won presidential approval for continued work on

319 Willbanks, Abandoning Vietnam, 17.
Vietnamization as well as a token withdrawal of troops later that year. Nixon and Kissinger’s faith in themselves eased their resistance to Vietnamization, which would undercut their power at the bargaining table by creating the possibility of a complete American withdrawal in the absence of a negotiated settlement. On June 8, Nixon announced the first unilateral redeployment of U.S. troops, symbolizing Laird’s early success at making Vietnamization administration policy.

The second half of 1969 saw a resurgent Kissinger try to derail Vietnamization, an objective he would ultimately fail to achieve. Seeing a lack of progress at the Paris peace talks, Kissinger feared that Vietnamization had compromised his chances of securing a settlement beneficial to America’s interest and one that called for the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and U.S. forces from South Vietnam. Kissinger urged the president to issue an ultimatum to Hanoi, giving them until November 1 to make concessions in Paris. If they failed to comply, Kissinger wanted Nixon to halt Vietnamization and authorize a series of devastating air and naval attacks against North Vietnam. In short, Kissinger believed the credible threat of violence would force Hanoi’s hand, and he spent the summer and autumn months striving to make his escalatory Duck Hook policy an effective alternative to Laird’s Vietnamization. President Nixon seriously considered Kissinger’s Duck Hook planning, but events intervened to tip the balance in Laird’s favor. In particular, the October Moratorium lent credence to Laird’s argument that the public would not tolerate the war’s escalation. After Nixon decided not to implement Duck Hook, Vietnamization became America’s undisputed exit strategy from Vietnam. Kissinger had fought hard but lost; Vietnamization would continue.
Nixon and Kissinger failed to end the Vietnam War in 1969. Unable to do so, they continued to hope for a break in negotiations but they resigned themselves to the fact that Laird’s Vietnamization would have to continue. Because their diplomacy ultimately failed to secure the mutual withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces, Vietnamization dictated America’s departure from South Vietnam.

The domestic context pushed the administration towards Vietnamization, though. For Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird, the “the highly critical condition” of public opinion limited their options in Vietnam, and their concern over American war wariness came out in high-level meetings throughout 1969.\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation by Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., January 19, 1969, \textit{FRUS, 1969-1976}, 6:2.} Nixon felt that if the administration were going to take dramatic military action against North Vietnam, they would have to carry it out before antiwar sentiment began to swell again, something he believed would occur later that year. As the public and Congress came to expect continued withdrawals, Nixon felt compelled to continue Laird’s program, and the October Moratorium only reinforced Nixon’s fear that the fragile domestic situation would not tolerate Duck Hook. Although Kissinger had less regard for public opinion than Nixon or Laird, he too recognized that it could quickly limit his options as a policymaker. Kissinger thought that the domestic context only afforded the administration a brief window of opportunity to employ coercive tactics against North Vietnam and wanted to move away from Vietnamization before Americans became wedded to the idea of regular, unilateral withdrawals. Conversely, Laird believed the national mood necessitated Vietnamization and without it,
the American people would quickly demand an end to the war regardless of the consequences. Thus, all three individuals saw domestic unrest as a ticking time bomb that could not only curtail the Vietnam War but also undermine Nixon’s other political and foreign policy goals.

Moreover, the origin of Vietnamization shows the difficulty presidents have of maintaining Cabinet unity. Even as domestic unrest occurred outside the White House, individuals within it interpreted events differently from their colleagues and subsequently arrived at different conclusions on what course to take in Vietnam. Vietnamization could be both the “salted peanuts” that staved off Americans appetite for complete withdrawal and the unhealthy snack that triggered an insatiable hunger for America’s immediate exit from the war. In short, Nixon did not enter the White House in 1969 with a secret plan to end the war, and instead, his bureaucracy pursued several different and opposing policies to end the Vietnam War.

Indeed, Vietnamization was the product of a bureaucratic process that often circumvented the president and other members of his Cabinet. Laird thought his primary goal as Secretary of Defense was to Vietnamize the war and by the end of his first two weeks at the Pentagon, he had dedicated a significant portion of his Defense Department staff to developing this policy. Laird’s determination meant he would not allocate his bureaucratic resources and energy into answering Kissinger’s NSSM 1. It also meant that Laird would often tailor his withdrawal timetables to the audience he was trying to win over. Laird only presented those numbers he believed the Joint Chiefs and President Nixon would tolerate, but Laird would continually increase these numbers as they

321 Interview of Melvin R. Laird by Matloff and Goldberg.
became more malleable. In a similar fashion, Laird moved the military away from planning that maintained a large residual force in South Vietnam. Consequently, Laird pushed for more extensive Vietnamization that would make the South Vietnamese army capable of fighting off both NLF and North Vietnamese forces. This development represented a significant departure from America’s former policy of training and equipping ARVN soldiers to deal only with the insurgency, but Laird used his bureaucratic apparatus to guide the Nixon administration in this direction. It is important to note that Laird was not the only official to use these tactics. Kissinger had his own agenda and used his own resources to push for Duck Hook. Kissinger not only hid his secret negotiations from Laird, but he also used people within the Defense Department to revive and expand plans to blockade and bomb North Vietnam. To be sure, Kissinger sought to keep this planning hidden from Laird as he worked to derail Vietnamization.

The internal debate over Vietnamization and Duck Hook also strained the relationship between Laird and President Nixon. Nixon never abandoned the option of using dramatic military pressure to force Hanoi’s hand, but Vietnamization acted as a countervailing force that steadily reduced his diplomatic leverage as well as his ability to escalate the ground war. Nixon felt constrained by Laird’s polices and believed that his secretary of defense did not have the resolve to see the war through. Immediately after the Silent Majority speech, Nixon told Kissinger, “[Secretary of State William P. Rogers and Laird] haven’t got the guts. I think they’ll have to go.” Perhaps because of the
political risks involved, Nixon did not ask for Laird’s resignation. Instead, Laird found himself increasingly excluded from the president’s inner circle after 1969.322

Laird continued to expedite Vietnamization, though. Laird often used his power as secretary of defense to begin withdrawing troops and would then present the withdrawal to Nixon as a *fait accompli*. Kissinger’s military assistant, Alexander Haig Jr., bitterly recalled, “Laird would come into the White House smiling and saying, ‘We got more out this week than planned!’”323 Even still, Laird always secured presidential approval for these redeployments.324

There were several reasons why Laird was able to continue getting authorization for troop withdrawals even when Nixon felt that they were working against his foreign policy objectives. First, there was Nixon’s fear that halting Vietnamization or significantly escalating the war would risk a row within the administration, possibly leading to Laird’s resignation. Many political pundits considered Laird one of the leading moderates in the Nixon administration, and his resignation would invite a public backlash against Nixon. Moreover, Laird’s political acumen and congressional connections made a confrontation with his secretary of defense even more precarious. This rationale had played a role in Nixon’s decision against Duck Hook and it continued to affect his policymaking thereafter. Second, even as the war dragged on and Nixon’s optimism waned, Laird was able to continue withdrawing troops because of the president’s unassertive character. Nixon was not a man to confront members of his

Cabinet, even when they jeopardized his own objectives and policies. This personality characteristic partially explains the latitude Laird had when deciding the timing and size of redeployments. Third, Nixon had campaigned on Vietnamization in 1968 and then extolled its virtues in the Silent Majority speech in 1969. He had publicly committed himself to Vietnamization and could not abandon it without serious harm to his political standing. Finally, Nixon knew that delaying troop withdrawals would hazard domestic stability. The American people expected Nixon to continue withdrawing U.S. troops. A prolonged disruption in the return of American servicemen would invite more protests as well as weaken the resolve of the supposed “silent majority.” For all of these reasons, Nixon allowed Laird to continue withdrawing troops unimpeded.

Robert Dallek’s assertion that “Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird…took a backseat to Nixon and Kissinger in setting defense policy generally, and fighting the Vietnam War in particular” is wrong on Vietnam foreign policy; Laird’s Vietnamization became everything. As Nixon and Kissinger’s policies failed to end the war, Vietnamization remained America’s predominant exit strategy from Vietnam. Regardless of the lack of progress in Paris, more and more U.S. soldiers came home. Thus, there was a great deal of truth in the December 1969 Detroit Free Press article that called Laird “the second most powerful man in Washington,” and to the extent that Laird was in the backseat, he was clearly a backseat driver. Building on his own foreign policy views and Nixon’s campaign rhetoric, Melvin Laird turned Vietnamization into a

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real policy and worked to win and then secure its implementation. Without Laird’s moderating influence on Nixon’s foreign policy, it becomes very easy to imagine an even longer and deadlier war, with both America and Vietnam suffering as a result. Laird was decisive in setting U.S. policy in Vietnam, and his policy effectively ended America’s Vietnam War.
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