Ending America’s Vietnam War:
Vietnamization’s Domestic Origins and International Ramifications, 1968-1970

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David L. Prentice
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This dissertation titled

Ending America’s Vietnam War:

Vietnamization’s Domestic Origins and International Ramifications, 1968-1970

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Abstract

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Director of Dissertation: Chester J. Pach

America’s exit from Vietnam was as contingent, complicated, and agonizing as its decision to pursue war in Indochina, and this dissertation focuses on the critical period—1968-1970. Based on research at eight domestic and foreign archives, I argue that the perception of a crumbling home front drove U.S. policymaking and that America’s allies and enemies appreciated and reacted to this domestic context and decision-making. In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson concluded he had little choice but to cap U.S. troop strength, stop bombing North Vietnam, and begin negotiations, but he drew the line at unilateral withdrawals and kept military escalation on the table.

Hence, the battle over America’s exit strategy occurred during Richard Nixon’s first year in office. During 1969, three individuals—Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Melvin Laird—plotted, schemed, and wrangled over Nixon’s Vietnam strategy. The allure of victory remained strong as Nixon and Kissinger devised an elaborate plan to threaten and then launch a savage bombing campaign against North Vietnam to compel its capitulation before time ran out at home. Secretary of Defense Laird argued the domestic front would not tolerate such a mad scheme. Instead, Laird developed what became America’s exit strategy, Vietnamization—the strategy of improving South Vietnamese military capabilities while withdrawing American troops. Though overlooked by historians, Laird’s Vietnamization defeated Kissinger’s militant strategy to halt U.S. troop
reductions and escalate the war. By the end of 1969, Nixon sided with Laird, hoping that Vietnamization could win the war at home and abroad.

Vietnamization’s domestic origins reflect only part of the story, and this dissertation establishes its international context as well. Foreign officials understood U.S. policymakers had changed course to abate pressure at home. Whereas both the North and (surprisingly) South Vietnamese greeted Vietnamization with confidence, Australia and Great Britain worried it could be an early symptom of a global American retreat. They feared humiliation in Vietnam would create an isolationist lobby that would curtail U.S. commitments worldwide. Nevertheless, they judged Nixon’s resolve and Vietnamization positively. The Nixon administration was holding the line in the United States and South Vietnam, but all understood that Vietnamization marked the beginning of the end of America’s Vietnam War.
For my parents
Acknowledgments

This dissertation was the product of many hours of meticulous research, writing, and revising, but it is in no way the product of one individual. Many people, guided, enriched, and encouraged this work, and I consider myself in their debt. Its omissions and errors, of course, are my own.

First, I would like to thank Brooks Flippen. His guidance and timely advice were invaluable to me as I began my own career as a historian. From explaining what a historian does to commenting on my earliest work, Dr. Flippen was diligent to make me a better scholar. In short, Dr. Flippen was the first person to show me what it means to be a professional historian; it is an example I will always strive to live up to.

At Cornell University, I am thankful to whoever put Keith Taylor and Fredrik Logevall’s course on the Vietnam War in Baker Laboratory. It was appropriate that I wandered in just as they began covering the Tet Offensive. Enthralled, I snuck back in for the rest of the semester. Along those same lines, I am thankful to Professor Logevall for opening his door to a student in Chemistry and Chemical Biology. He was generous with his time and advice when few others would have been as kind. Years later, he again proved most helpful as he offered suggestions on how to turn my domestic-centered thesis into a manageable, international history of Vietnamization.

Without the aid of the hard-working people at archives worldwide, this dissertation would have lacked the sources necessary to sustain its central arguments. At the Gerald Ford Library, 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 he quickly put me at ease. Archivists at the Nixon and
Johnson presidential libraries also went out of their way to facilitate my research. Thanks also goes to the staffs at the National Archives in College Park, Public Records Office in Kew, National Archives of Australia, and Fulbright papers in Fayetteville. Nancy Adgent at the Rockefeller Archives Center also deserves especial mention. Knowing that I had little time, she accommodated my requests and went above and beyond to get me the necessary documents.

I would also like to thank the librarians at the Dallas Public Library. They filled hundreds of inter-library loan requests without question and always with the utmost speed. They enabled me to continue my work after I had moved from Athens. I could not have completed my comprehensive exams or secondary research without their assistance.

Former Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird is also among those whose unexpected generosity amazed me. I never will forget that fateful February night, when while working on the seminar paper that prefigured this dissertation, 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 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.

At Ohio University, there are too many to name but I will try nonetheless. I am grateful to the History Department and the Contemporary History Institute for generously funding my many research trips. Professors Robert Ingram, John Brobst, Kevin Mattson, and Chester Pach supervised my subject fields and thereby established the intellectual
foundation for my scholarly endeavors. Laura Seddelmeyer proved invaluable in helping me navigate the literature on Australian grand strategy and Vietnam as well as Australia’s archives. A true gentleman and scholar, Bruce Steiner was a wellspring of encouragement and delightful conversation. 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 questions I had not thought to ask. Similarly, my dissertation committee members, Ingo Trauschweizer, Paul Milazzo, and Patrick Washburn, gave useful suggestions on the prospectus and then the dissertation itself.

I also owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my advisor and dissertation chair, Chester Pach. As a first year-graduate student searching for a seminar topic, I was in his office often, and Professor Pach suggested I look into Vietnamization. As I began delving deeper into the subject, 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 dissertation’s revisions. They made for a much better dissertation. Likewise, his thoughtful counsel on the other aspects of our profession will make me a better historian.

Of course, many others deserve mention. Ed Hull and I spent countless hours discussing the thesis, the Vietnam War, and history broadly, and I look back on those evenings with the utmost fondness. Ed and his wife Patty also deserve my eternal thanks for introducing me to my wife. The Byrds and the Sargents were constant sources of encouragement and friendship as well.

Most important of all have been the love, support, and encouragement of my family. Words cannot describe how much they mean to me, and so I will keep it relatively short. Young James was born just as I began the second chapter, and he was ever by my side as
I wrote and finished the dissertation (though naptimes were an invaluable blessing). Now a precocious toddler, he is in and out of the office rather than a constant presence but he never ceases to bring a smile to my face.

My wife Jaclyn deserves my utmost praise and gratitude. More than anyone else, she stood by me and cheered my work on. She also endured many a research trip, patiently scanning or photocopying thousands of documents. In some cases, it felt like we looted and carted off whole archives. She is the perfect research assistant but more importantly, she is the perfect companion and wife.

My parents, Russell and Ann Prentice, saw this work through from the beginning. Their encouraging phone calls and support were an immeasurable help. They, along with Jaclyn and James, remind me that life is so much more than books and study. It is for my parents that I have dedicated this dissertation.
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<tr>
<td>ABM</td>
<td>Anti-Ballistic Missile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANZUS</td>
<td>Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty</td>
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<tr>
<td>ARVN</td>
<td>Army of the Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>BBC</td>
<td>British Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Clark Clifford Papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>COSVN</td>
<td>Central Office of South Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEFE</td>
<td>Ministry of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMZ</td>
<td>Demilitarized Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>FCO</td>
<td>Foreign &amp; Commonwealth Office</td>
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<td>FRUS</td>
<td>Foreign Relations of the United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>GEP</td>
<td>George Elsey Papers</td>
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<td>GFL</td>
<td>Gerald Ford Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>GO-GU</td>
<td>General Offensive and General Uprising</td>
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<tr>
<td>GVN</td>
<td>Government of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>HAK</td>
<td>Henry A. Kissinger</td>
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<tr>
<td>JCS</td>
<td>Joint Chiefs of Staff</td>
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<td>J. William Fulbright Papers</td>
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<td>Lyndon Baines Johnson</td>
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<td>LN</td>
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<td>Laird Papers</td>
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<td>MACV</td>
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<td>NATO</td>
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<td>NLF</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
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<td>NVA</td>
<td>North Vietnamese Army</td>
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<td>Abbreviation</td>
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<td>NSC</td>
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<td>Prisoner of War</td>
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<td>Pre-Presidential Series</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<td>PRG</td>
<td>Provisional Revolutionary Government</td>
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<td>Record Group</td>
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<td>Richard Nixon Library Birthplace and Foundation</td>
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<td>RNPLM</td>
<td>Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum</td>
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<td>RVN</td>
<td>Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<td>RVNAAF</td>
<td>Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces</td>
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<td>SALT</td>
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Introduction:

The Beginning of an Ending

“Wars are easy to enter into. They’re very difficult to get out of.” ~Melvin Laird

Vietnam was America’s longest twentieth-century war. In part, U.S. apathy towards Vietnam provided President Lyndon Johnson with a “permissive context” that allowed him to escalate and then Americanize this conflict in 1965. While America’s role in Vietnam preceded 1965, Johnson’s commitment of large numbers of U.S. troops steadily ended public indifference towards Vietnam. 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.

America’s exit was as contingent, complicated, and agonizing as its decision to pursue war in Indochina. Even with the commitment of half a million men, victory in Vietnam remained elusive. By 1968, decreasing public support and rising congressional scrutiny and social unrest necessitated a change in strategy, but even then the advocates of negotiation, de-escalation, and de-Americanization lost many more battles than they won. Those policymakers who pushed President Johnson to continue, if not expand, the conflict remained strong, and LBJ’s every instinct was to send more soldiers and increase the bombing of communist North Vietnam. But domestic factors dictated he resist these

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temptations. Johnson capped U.S. troop strength, stopped bombing North Vietnam, and began negotiations but he would not countenance unilateral reductions.

The battle over America’s exit strategy from Vietnam occurred during Richard Nixon’s first year in office. During 1969, three individuals—Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Melvin Laird—plotted, schemed, and wrangled over Nixon’s Vietnam strategy. Each had been vociferous advocates of the war and heavily involved in Republican politics, but in 1968, they concluded that the presidential election dictated a de-Americanization pledge. For Laird, it was more than smart politics; he feared a continuation of the war at its current level of destruction and casualties would erode the war’s domestic and congressional support as well as invite a social catastrophe. As Nixon’s first Secretary of Defense, Laird was the architect and proponent of what became America’s exit strategy, Vietnamization—the strategy of improving South Vietnamese military capabilities while withdrawing U.S. troops. The allure of victory remained strong, though. Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, devised an elaborate plan first to threaten and then launch a savage bombing campaign against North Vietnam to compel its capitulation. Had it not been for Melvin Laird’s decisive influence, Nixon might have gone through with it in November 1969. Laird’s faith in Vietnamization and his constant assessment of the domestic situation reminded the president that the American people demanded an honorable exit from Vietnam. By the end of 1969, Nixon had sided with Laird, hoping that his Vietnamization plan could win the war at home and abroad.

Vietnamization’s domestic origins, though critical to its development and execution, reflect only part of the story, and this dissertation establishes its international context as well. The Vietnamese certainly appreciated American political and social
realities. The first U.S. withdrawals heartened the North Vietnamese who interpreted Vietnamization as another step toward uniting their country, but they feared that if the improvement of South Vietnamese forces lived up to its rhetorical hype, it would prove even more difficult to conquer the South. Unexpectedly, Saigon welcomed Nixon’s Vietnamization as an opportunity to build on their recent successes and continue the war their way. Since early 1968, South Vietnamese president, Nguyen Van Thieu, had urged U.S. policymakers to begin reductions in order to shore up the domestic support necessary for continuing the war. Nixon’s resolve, promised aid, and prudent withdrawals seemingly proved that the United States was staying in Vietnam. Although 1969 ended with South Vietnamese and American optimism, all admitted the war was far from over, and concern about its possible outcome extended beyond Indochina.

For many U.S. allies (and a few enemies), the manner of America’s exit from Vietnam mattered a great deal. Unlike in 1964, notable foreign officials, particularly Australian and British policymakers, judged that given the nascent strength of the Saigon regime and the dramatic Americanization of the war, U.S. credibility was now on the line in South Vietnam. With American leaders already bowing to domestic pressures and accepting unilateral withdrawal, these same allies shared the irrational but pervasive fear that defeat and humiliation in Vietnam would create an insatiable isolationist lobby that would curtail and reduce U.S. commitments worldwide. Nevertheless, they judged Nixon’s resolve and Vietnamization strategy positively. In 1969, world leaders understood Vietnamization was not a synonym for precipitate withdrawal or a decent interval between a U.S. exit and South Vietnamese collapse. America was not getting out of Vietnam but staying in, albeit with a diminishing presence in order to achieve some semblance of peace
with honor. In short, Asian and European officials supported this strategy as the best option available given America’s domestic problems.

Overall, this dissertation weaves together the domestic and international contexts that framed Vietnamization’s creation and reception in 1968-1969. At home, social unrest, antiwar protests, congressional and presidential politics, and bureaucratic infighting shaped U.S. foreign policy and ultimately produced the Vietnamization strategy. Only domestic considerations can adequately explain why one of the Vietnam War’s most consistent and vociferous hawks—Richard Nixon—adopted a policy of de-escalation and unilateral U.S. withdrawal. Abroad, its implementation had widespread consequences, inspiring optimism in some and fears of U.S. abandonment in others. The foreign and the domestic are inseparable parts of the same narrative; both are necessary for understanding Vietnamization. These arguments and assumptions form the dissertation’s basis. The principal historical actors had their own reasons for advocating, accepting, resisting, or reacting to Vietnamization. But above all else, Vietnamization marked the beginning of the end of America’s Vietnam War.

The origins of Vietnamization remain one of the least explored and most misunderstood subjects of the Vietnam War. While James Willbanks’s Abandoning Vietnam provides a good operational 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 Laird’s fundamental role in shaping Nixon’s early
foreign policy. Recent works like Laird’s official biography, *With Honor* by Dale Van Atta, or Andrew Johns’s *Vietnam’s Second Front* cursorily acknowledge Laird’s decisive role in Vietnamization but fail to explain the uncertainty of its implementation or its international context. Even with these tentative revisions, the bulk of the historiography depicts Nixon and Kissinger as foreign policy giants with exclusive control over America’s Vietnam strategy.

Perhaps because the president and secretary of state (or in this case, national security advisor) 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, and so it was only natural that the media and historians would gravitate toward the latter. Finally, Kissinger’s visible diplomatic role in Nixon’s endeavors abroad, particularly détente, the opening to communist China, and the Paris Peace Accords ending the Vietnam War, earned him the reputation of being a foreign policy superstar. Lacking the glamour and the drama of Kissinger’s showboating diplomacy, Laird and his Vietnamization have remained on the periphery of Vietnam War historiography.

Yet, Laird’s Vietnamization strategy significantly shaped administration foreign policy by effectively ending America’s presence in the Vietnamese ground war, something Berman’s emphasis on diplomacy and the Paris negotiations overlooks. Realizing that unilaterally removing troops diminished U.S. diplomatic leverage and credibility, Kissinger fought Laird over the direction of Nixon’s Vietnam strategy and lost. Kissinger did everything he could to slow or stop Vietnamization’s implementation while convincing the president to escalate the war in Indochina and threaten Hanoi’s destruction. For most
of 1969, Nixon accepted Kissinger’s arguments and followed his policies, but when it came to the decisive moment of choosing escalation or Vietnamization, Laird and his domestic arguments won out. By the end of the year, Nixon publicly admitted that Vietnamization was “irreversible.” Henceforth, Kissinger’s contingency plans would serve primarily to protect Laird’s Vietnamization.

Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger’s mad schemes remain significant to Vietnamization’s origins as they illuminate the domestic context and the contingency of its implementation. Although Kimball and other historians have explored Nixon and Kissinger’s coercive diplomacy, they generally overemphasize the role of psychology in Nixon’s and Kissinger’s preference for a settlement achieved after a decisive, military blow against North Vietnam. Rather, both men agonized over the domestic context and the apparently faltering home front. Throughout 1969, their discussions centered on the lack of “time” (as measured in congressional and popular support) to consolidate South Vietnamese gains after the 1968 Tet Offensive. Archival research makes clear that the savage Duck Hook bombing campaign scheduled for November 1969 was the product of a concerted plan they formulated in late 1968 and early 1969 to end the war quickly before public patience ran out at home.

Laird understood the situation differently. He doubted that coercive U.S. diplomacy could compel the North Vietnamese to agree to a meaningful armistice. Only South Vietnamese political and military strength could end America’s Vietnam War while preserving U.S. Cold War interests. Laird also understood the United States needed a change in Vietnam strategy to alleviate unrest and political tension at home. He argued that by husbanding scarce U.S. military resources and political will through
Vietnamization, Nixon could carry on the war and give South Vietnam the time, financial aid, and equipment necessary to ensure its survival. Conversely, renewed and expanded bombing would quicken the erosion of the public and congressional support needed to sustain this effort over the long haul. Before Johnson’s Americanization of the war, Nixon had advocated a strategy that emphasized indigenous soldiers fighting with at most the aid of unrivaled American firepower (something historians too focused on Nixon’s penchant for escalation miss). Given this preference and domestic realities, Laird convinced Nixon that Vietnamization was the only tenable path open to the president in 1969.

Other notable oversights and errors exist in the literature as well, and by using newly declassified sources in eight foreign and domestic archives, this dissertation corrects and deepens the historical understanding of Vietnamization’s origins. Historians have given short shrift to Kissinger’s role in 1960s Republican politics, though an examination of this period provides crucial insights into the evolution of his Vietnam policies. Most scholars have assumed that Vietnamization was a holdover from the Johnson administration when in fact no such program or plans existed. Vietnamization was Laird’s creation. This dissertation addresses these U.S. foreign policy issues.

There is a growing body of scholarly research on the interconnectedness of local and foreign actions, but historians have devoted scarce attention to the international aspects of Vietnamization. Examining Vietnamization through the lens of global history reveals at least two unexpected insights. South Vietnam embraced this strategy of unilateral U.S. reductions. And negotiations and Vietnamization along with exaggerated fears of American isolationism prompted Great Britain to encourage President Nixon to stay the course in Vietnam.
Historical references abound to how Nixon imposed the detestable U.S. withdrawals upon President Thieu. Looking back on the war, the South Vietnamese certainly remember Vietnamization with much disdain, but this hostility was not present in late 1969. Former President, Vice President, and air force general Nguyen Cao Ky called Vietnamization a “gigantic con trick foisted on American public opinion.” General Tran Van Don compared it to “walking blindfolded through a minefield” with the South Vietnamese uncertain of U.S. intentions and the Americans using Vietnamization as a cover for their retreat. The South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, Bui Diem, went even further, writing, “The manner in which the United States took its leave was more than a mistake; it was an act unworthy of a great power, one that I believe will be remembered long after such unfortunate misconceptions as the search and destroy strategy have been consigned to footnotes.” A sense of betrayal pervades postwar South Vietnamese memoirs, but contemporaneous accounts show most officials anticipating and even encouraging a program of de-Americanization.\(^3\)

Indeed, historians have overlooked President Nguyen Van Thieu’s role in advocating Vietnamization. Seeing America’s domestic problems firsthand in 1968, Ambassador Diem warned Thieu to prepare for U.S. disengagement, and he did. From spring 1968 to the June 1969 announcement of troop reductions, Thieu constantly exhorted Americans to begin a withdrawal program. Thieu was increasingly confident his nation could stand on its own but acknowledged he needed time and U.S. aid to develop his

military. Believing that American will was crumbling from within, Thieu concluded reductions would buy President Johnson and then President Nixon the time necessary to strengthen South Vietnam. When modest withdrawals did begin, the South Vietnamese interpreted them as appropriate given the U.S. domestic situation and military and pacification gains in the South. By year’s end, they judged Vietnamization was not a ploy to mask American abandonment but the means of ensuring South Vietnam’s survival. Overall, the South Vietnamese reacted to Nixon’s strategy with the tentative hope that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) could fight and win the war on its own.  

America’s other allies were more cautious, and international analysis reveals how they interpreted both the strategy and the U.S. domestic context that shaped it. Nixon’s secretive policies and Vietnamization exacerbated Asian and Australian fears that America was leaving the region. Surprisingly, British officials shared many of these unwarranted concerns, and they made a concerted effort in late 1969 to find ways to show British support for Nixon’s policies. By placing Vietnamization in its domestic and international context, this dissertation corrects the aforementioned oversights and so reveals far more about the connection between national policies and their broader implications than prior works.

Indeed, understanding Vietnamization is fundamental to discovering how the United States ended its involvement in Vietnam and how the manner of that disengagement played out on the world stage. Historians need a detailed study of Vietnamization because getting out of a war is always more difficult than getting into one, and this saga again

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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. Moreover, U.S. foreign policy decisions have a global dimension whether policymakers want them to or not. Historians must always consider issues of war and peace in their domestic and international contexts, and Vietnamization provides the perfect topic to explore these interconnections.
Politics may make for strange bedfellows, but Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Melvin Laird were not strangers upon Nixon’s entering the White House in 1969. They had well over a decade of contact and cooperation. They shared the same conservative anticommunist ideology while participating in Republican politics to advance their ideals as well as their own partisan interests.

Most important of all, they held similar views on Vietnam. Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird were three of the most consistent and at times, militant, Vietnam hawks in the 1950s and 1960s. Their anticommunism necessitated a strong defense of South Vietnam, but citing the Korean War as proof, they believed Americans would not tolerate a protracted land war in Asia. Therefore, each adopted a strategic preference for asymmetrical warfare to contain Communism there. Ideally, regional and local defense forces would eliminate Communist insurgents while superior U.S. air and naval power provided military support and deterred a general invasion. In the 1950s, they argued that American policymakers should do more to build up indigenous forces, especially those in South Vietnam. As Hanoi greatly increased its aid and infiltration in the 1960s, they maintained that the solution to the Communist insurgency was South Vietnamese military training, modernization, and expansion. Instead of sending troops, U.S. policymakers should direct resources toward developing the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and deploy American firepower against North Vietnam, savagely bombing and quarantining them with a naval blockade until they stopped moving supplies and men into the South. The South Vietnamese would conduct the war in the jungles while American jets fought from the air. They urged
Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to give the South Vietnamese what
they needed and punish the North Vietnamese with American airstrikes. Even as the
situation in Indochina spiraled out of control in the mid-1960s, they opposed sending large
numbers of American ground troops but reminded President Johnson that he could not
afford to let South Vietnam fall.

Indeed, they were at their most hawkish when they perceived a political opportunity
to attack Democratic leaders for being weak on Communist aggression, and they used the
foreign conflict to advance their domestic careers. President Kennedy’s and Johnson’s
alleged weakness and mistakes allowed Nixon to rebuild his political career after losing
successive elections in the early 1960s. A world in turmoil gave Kissinger the chance to
sell himself as the calculating strategist, offering sage political and foreign policy advice
to the nation’s leaders. Laird became a leading congressional politician by attacking
Democrats on foreign policy issues, particularly Vietnam. In short, this trio worked (often
together) so that their political fortunes rose because of crises in Indochina.

Thus, ideological, strategic, and political imperatives made South Vietnam’s
survival an absolute necessity for Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird, but this volatile calculus
took them (and the nation) further than they intended. Although opposed to an American
land war in Asia, their rhetoric and posturing encouraged that very thing. Bombing
campaigns similar to what they first proposed proved unable to discourage Hanoi, and so
President Johnson steadily deployed more and more U.S. soldiers to South Vietnam.
President Johnson’s commitment of American combat troops ran counter to their
prescriptions for Vietnam, but they preferred an Americanized war to handing Indochina
over to the Communists. Due to Cold War and credibility concerns, they could not let
South Vietnam go. In sum, politics and anticommunism created an open-ended commitment that could not stop after their asymmetrical warfare had proven inadequate.

Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird’s Vietnam strategy resurfaced in 1969, though. Nixon and Laird would Vietnamize the war by building up the South Vietnamese military and withdrawing American forces. Meanwhile, Nixon and Kissinger secretly planned to unleash the brunt of U.S. air and naval power against North Vietnam to compel their surrender. But by then, Laird no longer believed American society and politics could handle such escalation. Only in 1969, with Kissinger and Nixon favoring escalation and Laird de-escalation, did the three significantly differ on the Vietnam War.

The Trio to 1952: Anticommunism and Self-Interest

The trio’s formative years had a powerful and lasting effect on how they viewed international relations. They each matured in an age that pitted ideologies against one another and, in turn, they each embraced anticommunism. These men saw Communism as a global menace to American security and interests. In the context of the late 1940s and early 1950s, their conservative, anticommunist ideology proved more than compatible with their aspirations. Their opposition to Communism advanced their careers but also provided the key assumptions that framed their policy choices from the 1950s on.

Though Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird adopted parallel outlooks on foreign policy and domestic politics, their personal backgrounds were quite different. Richard Nixon was the second child of a religious mother and hardworking southern California grocer. Henry Kissinger was born into middle-class comfort in Weimar Germany only to see his

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5 Their birth years give a sense of their historical context: Nixon, 1913; Laird, 1922; and Kissinger, 1923.
father lose everything he had worked for when the Nazis ascended to power. Melvin Laird, or “Bom” as his family affectionately called him, was born into one of Wisconsin’s most prominent political families. By the 1950s, all three aspired to greatness: to become a national statesman, a grand strategist and counselor to presidents, a national politician wielding power for cause and country.

Nixon’s childhood was far from impoverished but neither was it anywhere near privilege. Nixon absorbed his father’s work ethic and passion for politics and his mother’s Quaker values of tolerance and distaste towards showing emotion. He also acquired a strong and abiding respect for law and order along with self-righteousness against those who would use their freedoms irresponsibly as a license for disorder or apathy. These values formed the crucible from which his staunch anticommunism emerged.⁶

Beginning in 1946, Nixon increasingly focused on the Communist menace at home and abroad. As a newly elected member of Congress, Nixon toured Europe in 1947. Overseas, he met disfigured victims of Communist terrorism, and his conversations with Communist leaders confirmed in his mind their allegiance to Moscow as well as the need to counter Communism with determination and forceful diplomacy. On returning home, Nixon sought to move the public in favor of President Harry Truman’s Cold War policies despite facing reticence and at times opposition from his isolationist constituents. Representative Nixon not only supported Truman’s foreign aid programs, containment strategy, and the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe and thwart Communism there, but also called on the president to fight Communism in Asia. For Nixon, Communism posed a

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global threat to international stability and democratic development. By 1948, his upbringing, experience, and travels had generated an anticommunist ideology that would remain with him throughout his life.  

As the domestic climate of anticommunism heated up, Nixon’s ideology became congruous with political opportunity. Biographer Conrad Black may rightly contend that Nixon demonstrated “comparative moderation” in his anticommunist zeal on the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), but Nixon’s rhetoric and stand facilitated his rise and established his national political career. In particular, Nixon’s investigation into Whitaker Chamber’s allegations that the urbane former State Department official Alger Hiss had been a Soviet spy divided policymakers and intellectuals but it made Nixon a national political figure. Nixon used this fame to run for the Senate in 1950 while exploiting popular fears of internal Communist subversion to help seal his electoral victory. Nixon did not invent his anticommunism or Cold War concerns for political gain but when opportunity presented itself, he used it as a means to propel his political career.  

As a rising Republican star, Senator Nixon continued his crusade against Communism. In 1950, he again argued, “Communism requires a worldwide resistance.” As war erupted on the Korean peninsula, Nixon favored total American mobilization and demanded “complete victory.” In Nixon’s global Cold War as well as the Korean War, he also emphasized the use of non-American troops. The senator advocated using Nationalist Chinese and United Nations’ soldiers to oppose Mao Zedong’s Communist army in Korea.

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8 Black, Invincible Quest, 125, 144; and Ambrose, Nixon, Volume I, 176, 210-211, 222.
while the United States utilized its superior naval and air forces to bomb and blockade the People’s Republic of China until it relented. Nixon’s faith in the efficacy of American air and naval power became a cornerstone of his military and strategic thinking, but so was his emphasis on using allied or local forces in battle. Along with anticommunism, faith in the efficacy of U.S. firepower and a belief in local responsibility were the principles that formed the bedrock of young Nixon’s views on American foreign policy. As his stature as a Republican politician and international statesman rose in the 1950s, Nixon found greater opportunities to confirm and expound these beliefs, especially after Dwight Eisenhower chose Nixon to be his running mate in part due to the latter’s staunch anticommunism. But setting another important precedent, Nixon backed the deployment of U.S. soldiers to the Korean Peninsula in order to win a decisive battle over Communism.⁹

Henry Kissinger was another young man whose ideas won him a larger audience in the 1950s, and these beliefs had roots in Kissinger’s personal experience and academic studies. Kissinger was born in 1923 to Jewish parents living in the Weimar Republic. Young Kissinger watched the democratic Republic crumble and succumb to Nazism and Hitler’s demagoguery. Nazi policies stripped his father of his teaching job, and anti-Semitism made his family virtual exiles in their own country. The Kissinger family left Germany in 1938, but Henry, like so many of his generation, carried with him an innate conservative distrust of the masses. Democracies would always be susceptible to demagogues—fascist or Communist. Ironically, Kissinger believed only a strong

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statesman could deliver the people from their suicidal infatuation with despotism, and Kissinger hoped to become the voice of reason advising these great leaders.\textsuperscript{10}

Kissinger’s natural brilliance, European background, and hard work translated into success, first as an American soldier and administrator in World War II and then as a student at Harvard, but the German experience continued to haunt him. Historian Bruce Kuklick described Kissinger as “a gloomy young man…he worried about order in civilization, expatiated on the role of statesmen in promoting the stability of states, and prognosticated about the disintegration of cultures.”\textsuperscript{11} With Kissinger there was a distinct and consistent preference for order over justice, and in the 1940s and 1950s, he concluded that revolutionary Communism posed the greatest threat to international peace and stability.

At Harvard, likeminded intellectuals surrounded Kissinger. An epitome of the “Cold War University” and early 1950s intellectual milieu, Harvard forged close ties with government institutions. For postwar intellectuals, Communism was another form of tyranny as pernicious as fascism. Moreover, its expansion threatened to undermine friendly governments and secure strategic areas. Academics like Kissinger sought to instill democratic values in their students and aid policymakers in their common war with Communism. Kissinger’s colleagues moderated their anticommunism as the Cold War consensus began its gradual dissolution in the mid-1950s, but perhaps due to his firsthand experience with fascism, Kissinger continued to harbor an abiding distrust of Communism.


into the 1960s. He consistently viewed Communists as aggressive expansionists, happy to destabilize the world. His task as an intellectual was to utilize university resources and advise leaders on how to halt Communism’s ideological and territorial advance.\textsuperscript{12}

Kissinger’s early projects sought to accomplish this goal while promoting his reputation. In particular, his International Seminar at Harvard brought budding students and emerging world leaders together to solidify transatlantic ties in defense of Western democracy against Communism. Participants represented the elite who upon returning home could act as anticommunist statesmen. But like Nixon, his anticommunism served dual purposes. Kissinger’s seminars and editorial work at Harvard gave him the foundation, prestige, and contacts necessary to emerge in the 1950s as a famous grand strategist and scholar.\textsuperscript{13}

Unlike Nixon or Kissinger, Melvin Laird was born into politics. His maternal grandfather had been Wisconsin’s lieutenant governor; his father, Melvin R. Laird Sr., served as a state senator from 1941-46. Laird’s mother was also active in local and national politics through community organizations and the Republican Party apparatus. Even at a young age, Laird was no stranger to politics.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Suri, \textit{Henry Kissinger}, 93-95 but see also Richard Pells, \textit{The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 346-348; and Memo, HAK to Emmett Hughes, 9/23/1960, folder 968, Box 101, Series: L-Projects, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.


Like millions 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 the USS Maddox.\textsuperscript{15} During this military tour, 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. He returned home with shrapnel in his body and a firsthand experience with war that would temper his hawkishness as a policymaker.\textsuperscript{16}

Melvin Laird soon found himself involved in politics. His father unexpectedly died 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.\textsuperscript{17} After six years in the state senate, Laird ran as a Republican for the U.S. Congress in Wisconsin’s seventh congressional district. Though no friend of Communism, Laird understood his parochial constituents to whom the price of butter mattered far more than sending guns to far-off Turkey. He would not become one of the foremost Republican hawks until the early 1960s. His 1952 victory marked the start of a promising congressional career that would last until he became Secretary of Defense in 1969, but the legacies of war and politics stayed with him. Laird came to hold two firm

\textsuperscript{15} This ship is the same USS Maddox (DD-731) that was later involved in the Gulf of Tonkin incident.

\textsuperscript{16} Laird, A Mind of Her Own, 239-252.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 281, 341.
beliefs: policymakers should only commit U.S. soldiers as a last resort and that the American people spoke through their congressional representatives.\(^{18}\)

When Dwight Eisenhower assumed office in 1953, Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird had formed their anticommunist ideology. They were cold warriors. For Nixon and Kissinger in particular, Cold War ideology, politics, and self-interest went hand in hand, and anticommunism was something America should export abroad. With Soviet nuclear advances and emerging conflicts in the Third World, the 1950s would try their beliefs in new ways.

**1952-1960, Defending Third World Armies from the Air**

Dwight Eisenhower was the first president who dealt continually with the Third World—those nations aligned with neither the capitalist West nor Communism. President Eisenhower interpreted revolutions and threats there as part of the global challenge to the Free World. Ike sought victory there but appreciated that after Korea, the American people would not endure the deployment of soldiers to fight the limited wars and insurgencies in the Third World. Instead, Eisenhower emphasized foreign aid to strengthen these nations, psychological and covert operations to discourage or thwart internal subversion, and America’s strategic air, sea, and nuclear power to deter outright Soviet and Chinese aggression.\(^{19}\)

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Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger agreed with President Eisenhower’s assumptions. All three called for a global containment strategy that relied on America’s superior firepower and built up indigenous anticommmunist forces. They exaggerated Eisenhower’s faith in U.S. airpower by interpreting it as a panacea that had ended the Korean War and deterred Communists from further adventurism. They called for a militant defense of the Third World but always emphasized local responsibility. Third World armies fighting on the ground could rely on American air support, though. Wracked by the problems posed by nationalism and Communism, troubled French Indochina often became the focus of their attention in the 1950s, and their prognostications reveal the bedrock of principles on which they built their 1960s policies. Indeed, Nixon was a leading 1950s Vietnam hawk, and Kissinger was a prominent proponent of fighting limited wars in the Third World when necessary. In short, all of them sought to minimize the risk of a U.S. ground war but they would not countenance any defeat in the Third World. In the 1950s then, they each encouraged a greater commitment to South Vietnam and in the process, produced a situation in the 1960s that required further and further American intervention.

As Dwight Eisenhower assumed the presidency, the Korean War was the most pressing national and international concern, and Eisenhower’s handling of the armistice talks set a powerful precedent for all three. Both Kissinger and Nixon had called for complete military victory in Korea. As Vice President, Nixon muted his public rhetoric but he still wanted President Eisenhower to secure victory in Korea by using American airpower. Eisenhower entered the White House intent on expanding the bombing and threatened to use nuclear weapons, but unlike his fiery Vice President, Eisenhower and the American people were ready for peace. So too were their enemies—the Chinese, Soviets,
and North Koreans. Thus, despite South Korean obstinacy, Ike decided to make concessions and settle. Historian Jeffrey Kimball rightly noted, “Neither side, therefore, can be said to have alone been the ‘losing side’; both were losers, and both had come more or less simultaneously to the conclusion that it was time to end this costly, deadlocked war.”

Yet Kissinger, Laird, and Nixon misinterpreted these events in a way that would shape their outlooks on Vietnam in the 1960s. In 1955, Kissinger argued that a “substantial military victory” had been possible in Korea; American policymakers need only to have increased the number of troops and prolonged the war. In his first major book, Kissinger continued to bemoan the Korean negotiations and the decision to abandon military victory as an option.

Conversely, Laird and Nixon grossly inflated President Eisenhower’s actual role in ending the Korean War. Both concluded Eisenhower achieved peace not by sending in more U.S. troops but by threatening to destroy the enemy. Laird wrote, “How was the Korean War finally ended? When the Chinese Communists did not join in a truce, the United States warned she would bomb north of the Yalu, might blockade the Chinese coast, might use tactical atomic weapons, and would aim at winning a united Korea.” Nixon agreed wholeheartedly. Ike’s asymmetrical threats worked, but even if they had failed,

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Eisenhower could have brought the full measure of American air and naval strength against its foes, forcing surrender upon them. This belief was a complete misreading of what happened, and all three individuals premised their faith in asymmetrical warfare on either the assumption that the threat worked or that just a little more bombing and fighting would have defeated the Communists. With these elastic criteria, they laid the foundation for a war without limits. But all three used flawed readings of the Korean War to justify wild threats as well as the use of airpower against North Vietnam in the 1960s.23

The Korean War had other Vietnam-related effects. It refocused American policymakers’ attention on Asia and catalyzed their efforts to aid the French in Southeast Asia as they sought to put down a Communist Vietnamese nationalist insurrection.24 In the 1950s, U.S. leaders and commentators viewed the situation in Indochina with quiet, yet growing alarm. Often chief among them, Nixon lauded the importance of defending Vietnam against Communist tyranny but he also maintained that the fighting should be left to the Vietnamese.

On October 5, 1953, Vice President Nixon embarked on a seventy-day tour of Asia that proved critical to the development of these views. Nixon had been keeping a close eye on events in Indochina, privately noting in June that the situation there was “more serious than Korea” and that the “loss of [Vietnamese] resources” to the Communists could have a ripple effect throughout Asia.25 One of his first stops was Malaya where the British

24 Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Los Angeles: University of CA Press, 2005), 266, 276, 278.
25 Handwritten notes on meeting, RN, “Agenda for Cabinet Meeting, June 5 1953,” PPS 325:3-4, RNLBF.
with Malayan locals had been fighting a Communist insurgency after World War II. From
1952 on, British High Commissioner Gerald Templer’s leadership proved critical there as
he emphasized winning hearts and minds while building up the Malaya Regiment to defeat
the guerillas. Templer explained to Nixon, “What I am trying to do is convince all the
native leaders and the native troops that this is their war, that they are fighting for their
independence, and that once the guerillas are defeated it will be their country.” Templer’s
tactics and success at training local forces impressed Nixon and became the model of how
he proposed dealing with Communist insurgencies elsewhere.26

After leaving Malaya, Nixon spent six days in Indochina and he carried Templer’s
ideas with him. Nixon told the Vietnamese, “This war is not a remote and far off conflict
in an exotic part of the world. It is not just a ‘colonial’ war…. [but] the most active phase
of the free world’s fight to stay free.” While there, Nixon consistently emphasized the need
to train and aid the Vietnamese so that they could prosecute the war with or without French
support while building themselves up as a nation, just as Templer had done in Malaya.
Nixon wrote, “I believe that this area is so important that if there is any question at all of
adequate equipment” the United States should resolve to send whatever the French and
Vietnamese militaries require. For their part, the French needed to create an independent
Vietnamese state to harness popular nationalism. Unless they inspired and mobilized the
Vietnamese to defeat the Communists, this vital area would fall.27

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26 John A. Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and
Vietnam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 71-72, 88-91, 99-100; and RN: The Memoirs of
27 “[Speech of Vice President Nixon at Hanoi, November 4, 1953],” LN 366:2:4, RNLBF; “De Jean
Dinner Notes November 1953,” RN, LN 378:1:16, RNLBF; Letter, RN to William Bullitt, November 9,
1953, LN 364:2, RNLBF; Ambrose, Nixon, Volume 1, 320-322; Black, Invincible Quest, 277-280, 285, 297;
and RN, 125.
Upon returning home, Nixon sounded the warning at every opportunity. Nixon warned Americans that the situation there “is touch and go” but that Indochina was “from a strategic standpoint...infinitely more important than the outcome of the war in Korea.” Though a small nation, the loss of resources and territory to Communism would imperil all of Southeast Asia and ultimately Japan—the Communists’ real goal. Military victory was within reach if only the French leadership could resist domestic pressures to end the war and begin building up local armed forces. Nixon stated, “The problem in Indo-China is not materials; it is men” because the Vietnamese “training program is not going as well as it should.” America’s responsibility was to furnish them with all the aid they needed while motivating them to fight for their independence from Communist domination. In short, Americans must stand by the French and free Vietnamese as they resisted Communist subversion.\(^{28}\)

Behind closed doors, Nixon told Eisenhower and the National Security Council, “About Indochina we must talk optimistically; we have put money in, and we must stick by it,” but he also noted that the administration must accept the grim realities of the situation. Nixon likened the Viet Minh insurgency to that in Malaya, predicting it would take years to stamp out. Again, the Vietnamese needed adequate training and indigenous, inspirational leadership along with an unequivocal French promise for full independence. Eisenhower needed no convincing. His administration encouraged the French to persevere while the United States considered using its airpower and resources to back their defense

of Indochina. Yet even as they deliberated, Viet Minh forces were encircling the large
French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Soon the Vietnamese would have them completely cut
off from the rest of the French army and logistics.29

Nixon was the foremost administration advocate of American intervention to save
Dien Bien Phu. As the battle raged in Vietnam, Nixon gave a April 16 backgrounder before
the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Given European and American desire for
peace, Nixon noted, “It would be politically expedient for the United States, for our
Administration, I think, to agree to almost any kind of negotiation in Indo-China…. [but]
the free world cannot afford in Asia a further retreat to the Communists.” Instead, the
United States must stand firm in Vietnam, educating Americans and European allies alike
on its strategic and symbolic importance. Should France withdraw and Communist
expansion continue, Nixon argued, “We must take the risk now by putting American boys
in… [the White House] has to take the politically unpopular position of facing up to it and
doing it, and I personally would support such a decision.”30

Indeed, Nixon privately urged Eisenhower to rally the American people and
intervene with U.S. air and naval power to stop the Viet Minh siege of Dien Bien Phu.
Nixon believed air strikes would suffice but acknowledged he would use American troops
if necessary to prevent defeat in Indochina. At the very least, American airpower would
improve the military situation and French negotiating position. With congressional leaders

29 Memorandum of Discussion at the 177th Meeting of the National Security Council, December 23,
1953, FRUS, 1953, 13:929-931; and Fredrik Logevall, Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making
30 “1953 Convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors Address of Honorable Richard
M. Nixon,” 4/16/1954, PPS 208:14-10, RNLBF.
and international allies against U.S. intervention, his rhetoric and proposed policies carried great political risk but demonstrated his genuine anticommunism and commitment to Indochina. A cautious hawk, President Eisenhower appreciated the restraining domestic and foreign context as well as the stakes and so ruled the airstrikes “politically impossible,” sealing the fate of the surrounded French soldiers.31

On May 7, Dien Bien Phu fell, becoming the symbol of French defeat and Vietnamese nationalist victory, but for Nixon it took on a different meaning. Nixon reflected that the only way to “avoid more Indo Chinas” was to “win the people so that [revolutionary] revolts will not come.” American ideals of freedom, individual dignity, religion, self-determination, and property rights represented the promise captive peoples were looking for. So the United States must sell itself and ideals abroad. Nixon also recorded that “the Lesson of Indo China” was that “military strength would have made the difference;” economic aid and defense treaties “would not have helped.”32

Thus, Nixon interpreted Dien Bien Phu in the context of his previous experiences and anticommmunist instincts and derived future policies from this conclusion. Policymakers should look for amenable nationalist leaders while building up local defense forces, supported by superior U.S. air and naval firepower. The deployment of American soldiers would be an extreme last resort, so statesmen should bring decisive military strength against Communist forces before it became too late as it had after Dien Bien Phu.


32 Handwritten notes, RN, May 1954, PPS 325:4-6, 55-69, RNLBF.
Significantly, Nixon’s 1950s lessons from Indochina became the practical basis for his 1960s Vietnam positions.

By this time, Melvin Laird and Richard Nixon had become acquaintances, but as a moderate Republican from an isolationist district, Laird disagreed with Nixon on American involvement in Vietnam. Laird endorsed President Eisenhower’s rejection of a unilateral American intervention. Laird firmly stated on May 7, “Indochina is no place for American soldiers to fight.” As with Korea, Laird read events as another Eisenhower success. Laird believed Eisenhower’s “New Look” policy of developing anticommunist local forces backed by the threat of massive American retaliation deterred Communist aggression—both general and guerrilla. Laird agreed with Nixon that military strength was vital, but for Laird, Asia was no place for an American land war. Asian Communists had far superior manpower resources, and at best Americans could hope for a protracted yet stalemated ground war. Rather than try to meet the Communists man-for-man, the United States should use its preponderant air and naval strength to target the Communist sanctuaries, industrial cities, and logistics that made their insurgencies and military offensives possible. Vietnam 1954 presented few of these targets, and Laird backed Eisenhower’s decision as the strategically and politically smart choice.33

As a grand strategist, Henry Kissinger believed Dien Bien Phu besmirched U.S. credibility and exposed the New Look’s bankruptcy as a viable deterrent strategy. Kissinger misunderstood why Eisenhower vetoed intervention, concluding that the president feared the conflict might lead to a general war with the Soviet Union. His

33 Dale Van Atta, With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 43-44; and Laird, House Divided, 61, 93, 176.
solution was to create sufficient conventional forces while maintaining nuclear superiority so that America presented a flexible, credible deterrent. Ideally, this “graduated deterrence” would prevent a general war between the United States and the Soviet Union or China while allowing American policymakers to cope with limited wars. Yet, Kissinger’s strategy was not so different from Nixon, Laird, or even Eisenhower’s policies.  

Kissinger similarly maintained that Third World nations, which he called the “grey areas,” were integral to America’s global Cold War against Communism and that these peripheral countries must become able to defend themselves. America’s Third World allies had to develop the political stability necessary to prevent internal subversion along with the military strength and logistical infrastructure necessary to deter or resist a Communist invasion backed by the Chinese and Soviets. The United States should encourage regional alliances with strong local forces while always being ready to support them with airpower and financial assistance. In an age experiencing the “revolution of rising expectations” complicated by Communists’ opposition to “stability and consolidation,” American policymakers should prepare for limited wars but hold the use of U.S. soldiers as a measure of last resort.  

During the 1950s, Kissinger also explored the relationship between force and diplomacy. In April 1956, Kissinger wrote in *Foreign Affairs*, “Force and diplomacy are

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not discrete realms; on the contrary, the ultimate pressure during negotiations has always been the possibility that recourse might be had to force.” Like Laird and Nixon, Kissinger assumed this relationship was an iron law in geopolitics. Even in limited, peripheral wars, the U.S. ability to employ a graduated response or resort to massive retaliation afforded American diplomats untold bargaining power. Kissinger and Nixon never abandoned this conception of power, threats, and diplomacy but rather fell back upon it in the 1960s when their faith in local defense faltered.36

Kissinger also wrote on the importance of domestic circumstances in determining strategy and limiting foreign policy alternatives. Kissinger believed the Cold War battle of ideologies “has obliterated the traditional distinctions between domestic and foreign policy.” Leaders had to be able to marshal public opinion, perhaps using ideology or emotional politics, for his strategy of limited warfare and graduated deterrence to work. Kissinger wrote in 1957, “Given leadership and an understanding of the facts, the American people will sustain whatever level of military effort is necessary.” Kissinger shared this faith in a populace willing to bear any sacrifice with Laird and Nixon. As the United States deepened its obligation to the Republic of Vietnam (the noncommunist South Vietnamese state created in 1954), all three drew on the assumption that great statesmen could call upon the American people to defend freedom in Southeast Asia.37

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Nixon’s 1960 presidential campaign rhetoric summarized all of these themes and made the defense of South Vietnam a political necessity. Nixon considered the Cold War the most important issue facing the nation and advocated an activist diplomacy against Communist nations. True to his 1950s anticommunist zeal, Nixon boldly declared to audiences that Communists “are ruthless men. They are men bent upon conquest. They are men who respect only strength and firmness.” Only military and economic power would impress them, and America should maintain its superiority in both areas. Moreover, Nixon consistently maintained that America must work for victory over Communism. In the context of Chinese designs on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, Nixon promised that his presidency would never concede land to Communists, regardless of whether it was defensible. He swore, “I want to make clear that I oppose handing over to the Communists 1 inch of free territory…. [Doing so] leads either to war or surrender, or both. And that is why we must stand for freedom. We must not give an inch of territory.” John F. Kennedy narrowly defeated Nixon in the general election, but Nixon’s fiery anticommunist principles, commitments, and words survived intact ready to be brought out at the next political opportunity.38

In the 1950s, all three men advocated a worldwide defense against Communism, but the decade’s Third World challenges set powerful precedents for future policy. For Nixon and Laird, the Korean War demonstrated that Americans could not long stomach limited wars and that threats and American airpower could end Communist aggression.

The crisis in French Indochina proved to all three that without a legitimate nationalist government supported by its own army, America had few options. In total, Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird emphasized establishing local defense first, then supporting those soldiers with American airpower when necessary. As the situation in Southeast Asia deteriorated in the 1960s, Laird, Kissinger, and Nixon drew on their anticommunist principles and these 1950s lessons. Somehow local militaries on the ground, backed by U.S. planes in the air, could defend the Third World from Communist armies and insurgents alike.

1961-1964, the Politics of Southeast Asian Crises

President Eisenhower’s policies failed to contain the spread of Communism in the Third World, and as he closed out his administration, Southeast Asia was at a tipping point. Pro-American forces in Laos were on the retreat. Cambodia embraced Cold War neutrality. The Republic of Vietnam faced a rapidly growing Communist-backed insurgency. Yet, with a Democrat entering the White House, perhaps Republicans could turn foreign setbacks into domestic political gains.

Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger fastened their hopes on this troubled area and exploited Southeast Asian crises for political benefit. As biographer Conrad Black so eloquently put it, Nixon was “ultimately and uniquely indestructible” politically.\(^{39}\) His defeat in 1960 to the charismatic John F. Kennedy perhaps left him bitter, but he was certainly no less determined to become an international statesman. When JFK faltered on Cuba and Laos, Nixon pounced.

\(^{39}\) Black, *Invincible Quest*, 3.
Laird’s congressional standing rose in the early 1960s as he made a name for himself as a shrewd foreign policy hawk, constantly attacking Kennedy and then Johnson’s policies. More than Nixon or Kissinger, Laird recognized intervention had real domestic limits. Understanding American impatience and rising unrest, Laird would grow more pessimistic about U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia, but he never slackened in his commitment to South Vietnam.

Finally, Kissinger was not a Republican candidate but he drafted New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller’s position papers and worked on his political strategy to secure the Republican nomination in 1964 and 1968. Indeed, historians have overlooked how Kissinger played politics with the emerging Vietnam War in the mid-1960s. Historian Bruce Kuklick reflects this misunderstanding, writing, “Kissinger spent the 1960s much more as a spectator rather than even a minor player in the world of politics.” Yet, Kissinger worked closely with Rockefeller, composing his foreign policy statements and helping plan his campaigns. After the 1960 election, Kissinger wrote to Rockefeller regarding the latter’s future campaign strategy. Kissinger believed the United States was “entering another Democratic era” but foreign policy crises provided Republican challengers with political opportunities. Kissinger continued, “My conviction is that the international situation will almost certainly continue to deteriorate….an accelerated tempo of crises seems inevitable.” But each one could boost Rockefeller’s chances. Kissinger even appreciated that “the [1960] election did not finish Nixon as a force in the Republican Party.” In short, Kissinger tailored his early 1960s foreign policy advice to America’s

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political circumstances, hoping his patron could become the next president of the United States.\(^\text{41}\)

Politics was only half the equation, though. Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger remained stalwart anticommunists who advocated victory over Communism. The trio remained wedded to a coercive diplomacy backed by American U.S. airpower but they still placed primary responsibility on local militaries. From 1961-1964, only Kissinger contemplated the intervention of U.S. troops in Southeast Asia. This same period witnessed increasing interactions among Kissinger, Laird, and Nixon. Because of their similar beliefs and participation in Republican politics, they would work with one another to exploit international crises for their mutual gain.

Nixon, the down but not out politician, and Laird, the young congressman on the make, saw mutual advantage in working together to expose Kennedy’s foreign policy weaknesses for the good of the nation and the Republican Party. In an April 11, 1961 letter, Nixon appealed to Laird for advice on how to criticize the Kennedy administration. Behind the scenes, Nixon was pressing JFK to sponsor an invasion of Cuba by exiles to overthrow the Fidel Castro regime. After the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, Nixon met personally with the president. He pressed JFK to try again, telling him to “do whatever is necessary to get Castro and communism out of Cuba.” Kennedy rejected this advice, and Nixon began publicly lambasting his foreign policy. Laird concurred, writing back to Nixon on May 1 that “somehow or other, we must find a means of dramatizing to the American public the difficulty which the new President has in making big decisions and in

\[^{41}\] Memo, HAK to NAR, 11/18/1960, folder 184, Box 31, Subseries: 1 General Correspondence, Series: J2 Politics—George Hinman Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.
standing by these decisions once they have been made." Every international crisis, every perceived Kennedy blunder or concession provided an opportunity for political gain. Nowhere was this truer than the Southeast Asian nation of Laos.

Laos had all of the makings of an international crisis tinged with political peril. Formerly part of French Indochina, Laos was the small, landlocked nation that ran along North and South Vietnam’s western borders. As France formally withdrew in the mid-1950s, the Eisenhower administration stepped in to defend Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam from Communist expansion. Eisenhower’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 with time running out on his administration, it became clear that he would have to leave that decision to his successor.

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. JFK considered the Lao people weak pacifists, incapable of defeating determined Communists, but Laotian geography would make any U.S. military intervention extremely difficult. Furthermore, the Bay of Pigs fiasco shook Kennedy’s faith in his military advisors, making him reluctant to accept their advice on Laos. Finally, the pessimistic assessment of other Western leaders confirmed Kennedy’s doubts. By the end of April

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42 Letter, Laird to RN, 5/1/1961, LN 320:433, RNLBF.
44 Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 47, 85-86.
1961, the president had opted for a diplomatic solution to the Laotian predicament. Neutralization was now America’s primary aim in Laos.45

While the majority of congressional representatives and Americans supported President Kennedy’s decision, Laird and Nixon saw Laos’s neutralization both as a significant Cold War defeat and as a chance to attack the Democrats’ record on foreign relations. Nixon had urged Kennedy to use airpower to prevent a takeover of Laos while warning the president that his political honeymoon would end if he failed to take a firm stand against Communism. True to his word, Nixon began attacking the administration’s actions in Cuba and Laos as proof of Kennedy’s paralysis in the face of crisis. Echoing Nixon, Laird charged that because of JFK’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 argued that the proposed neutralization of Laos, coupled with the administration’s failure to salvage the Bay of Pigs invasion, had weakened American credibility and emboldened Soviet leaders to continue testing U.S. resolve. Given the domestic support for JFK’s Laotian policy, their protestations had little effect on policymakers. On July 23, 1962, the Geneva conference settled the neutralization of Laos by creating a coalition government that included Communist groups.46

Political partisanship was only one reason for Republican hostility toward neutralizing Laos because conservative anticommunists considered Laos absolutely critical


46 Mann, Grand Delusion, 230-231; RN, 235-236; Johns, Vietnam’s Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 24-25; and speech, Laird, “Foreign Policy,” folder “Speeches-ca 5/61-Foreign Policy,” Box A15, LP, GFL.
to the defense of South Vietnam. Laos’s significance 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 sanctuary for the Vietcong when the South Vietnamese government held the upper hand. Melvin Laird explained in his 1962 book, *A House Divided*, that neutralization was simply polite language for Communist domination and that Laos’s mountains held the geographic choke points necessary for keeping the North Vietnamese from sweeping south. Through ineptitude or cowardice, JFK handed Laos over to the enemy so 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.” In short, Laird and other hawks interpreted the neutralization of Laos as a strategic loss that threatened to undermine all of Southeast Asia.⁴⁷

Henry Kissinger and his research team, ever advising and preparing Nelson Rockefeller for a 1964 presidential run, also carefully followed the situation in Laos. Like Laird and Nixon, Kissinger saw Laos’s deterioration as a product of Kennedy’s “policy of indecision and half-hearted measures.” Before the Geneva settlement, Kissinger’s staff considered Laos so far gone that policymakers only had three options: neutralization, abandonment, or full intervention with U.S. ground troops. Letting Laos fall would sacrifice a strategically located Cold War proxy for the sake of expediency. Both this course and neutralization risked American credibility worldwide and would pave the way

for the Communist domination of Southeast Asia. “Unpalatable” as the deployment of soldiers would be domestically, such a move was necessary to save Laos, Southeast Asia, and U.S. credibility. One of Kissinger’s aides wrote, “If we do not defend Laos, we may be forced later to fight under even worse circumstances in Thailand or South Vietnam.”

Strategically, losing Laos opened up South Vietnam to covert infiltration; politically, it exposed President Kennedy to Republican attacks.

Kennedy and his advisors appreciated this delicate calculus, though, and sought to mitigate the impact of Laos’s neutralization on South Vietnamese security and American politics. Kennedy recognized how narrow his 1960 victory had been and feared that foreign setbacks could precipitate a political backlash from the right, hurting his reelection chances. So for every step JFK took away from Laos, he took a step towards a closer commitment to the Republic of Vietnam. But so did his Republican challengers.

After his 1962 loss in the California gubernatorial race, Nixon swore the press would not have him “to kick around anymore” because that was the end of his political career, but for a man as driven as Nixon, defeat was only the pause before the next round began. Nixon attributed his loss to Democrat Pat Brown as much to Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis as an allegedly biased California press. If a foreign policy crisis could unmake a gubernatorial campaign, then world events could surely restore his image as an international statesman. Nixon made Asia, particularly Vietnam, the

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48 This memo came from Kissinger’s research staff, and he forwarded it to Rockefeller. One can assume Kissinger supervised its creation and, by forwarding it to NAR, shared its conclusions.


50 Jacobs, “No Place to Fight,” 62; and Johns, Vietnam’s Second Front, 16, 25, 40.
geopolitical focal point of his comeback. But as Nixon began rebuilding himself, his anticommunist principles remained the same. Nixon continued to urge Americans to fight Communism at home and abroad “until final victory is achieved.” He remained one of the most hawkish politicians, constantly demanding Kennedy and then Lyndon Johnson to do more to preserve the Republic of Vietnam.51

Nixon’s prescriptions for Vietnam were in line with his 1950s strategy—strong local forces supported by U.S. air and naval firepower. Since 1959, an internal insurgency had flourished in South Vietnam, garnering more international attention as it rose in strength and numbers. Nixon was relatively quiet on Vietnam from 1962-1963 but he returned as loud as ever in 1964. In March, he toured Asia and argued that President Johnson should take the war to the North Vietnamese using South Vietnamese troops backed by American airpower. Upon returning home, Nixon exhorted America to show the determination necessary for “staying in and winning.” In June 1964, Nixon noted, “The crisis is not one of military power, economic productivity, or of propaganda—but of will, stamina!” South Vietnam needed the American leadership and will President Johnson so obviously lacked. U.S. credibility was on the line in Vietnam. If the United States lost there, America “would never be trusted again, would have to get out of Asia, and allies would not believe U.S. promises.” In his private notes, speeches, and August 1964

Reader’s Digest article, Nixon maintained his faith in the domino theory and America’s ability to achieve victory through the decisive use of airpower.\textsuperscript{52}

Yet, Nixon argued that training and modernizing the South Vietnamese army was the essential \textit{first} step. Capable South Vietnamese soldiers, backed by American planes, could go into Laos and North Vietnam, destroying the sanctuaries and cutting off the supply lines feeding the Vietcong insurgency. As South Vietnam grew stronger, the United States could bomb North Vietnam in order to compel them to stop aiding the southern insurgency. In short, the South Vietnamese would fight on the ground; the Americans from the sky.\textsuperscript{53}

Laird shared this assessment, and indeed articulated the need for ARVN improvement along with airborne retaliation against North Vietnam earlier and more often than Nixon. Laos’s neutralization had left Laird more pessimistic, but he remained dedicated to the Republic of Vietnam’s survival. Laird still called for victory over Communism, “fighting, winning, and recovering” lost territory. Laird boldly closed his 1962 book, “We have the means to roll it back. We must—and we shall!” In that same book, he called for a firm defense of South Vietnam achieved by training and equipping their soldiers to fight and win the guerrilla war with the Vietcong. As ARVN strength grew, the South Vietnamese could launch a counteroffensive against insurgent sanctuaries, “recognizing no borders” and perhaps invading North Vietnam with the help of the U.S. Navy. Laird also believed that North Vietnam’s centers of industry and logistics, Hanoi

\textsuperscript{52} Black, \textit{Invincible Quest}, 460-463; RN, “Crisis in Asia,” April 16, 1964, PPS 208:80:3, RNLBF; and handwritten notes on June 8, 1964 Speech “A Win Policy for Southeast Asia,” RN, PPS 208:80:12, RNLBF.

\textsuperscript{53} Handwritten notes on June 8, 1964 Speech “A Win Policy for Southeast Asia,” RN, PPS 208:80:12, RNLBF; and speech, RN, “A Win Policy for Southeast Asia,” RN, 6/8/1964, PPS 208:80:12, RNLBF.
and Haiphong, were uniquely vulnerable to American air and naval power and that policymakers should not hold back against them. His only caveat to this military escalation involved the use of American troops on the ground; Asia remained no place for an American land war.\textsuperscript{54}

As the situation in South Vietnam deteriorated in 1963-1964, Laird became more specific in his 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 Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{55} Laird clearly favored the latter alternative but he also made it known that he intended for others to do the fighting. In both his public statements and classified congressional briefings, Laird suggested the Johnson administration supplement South Vietnamese forces with soldiers from other nations, particularly the Republic of China (Taiwan).\textsuperscript{56} Laird thought that American air and naval power 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.

While Laird and Nixon declared their views on Vietnam publicly, Henry Kissinger quietly articulated Nelson Rockefeller’s foreign policy positions. Exposing the Democrats’ vacillation and setbacks in world affairs gave a Republican moderate like Rockefeller a platform for taking the White House, and Kissinger saw no better opportunity

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{54} Laird, \textit{House Divided}, 53, 96-97, 107-111, 179.  
than Vietnam. In 1962, he suggested the Governor adopt the position that America commit
“sufficient military effort” to end the insurgency. Kennedy’s “half-hearted” policies “may
get us slowly into a war that a decisive effort now might prevent.” Kissinger wrote, “The
responsibility for meeting and overcoming the Communist guerilla aggression falls
primarily on the South Vietnamese and their government, for it is their lives which are
most directly in danger.” The United States should attack the supply lines in Laos and
grant South Vietnam enough military aid to eradicate the Vietcong, but unlike Laird and
Nixon, Kissinger contemplated using American troops in Indochina. Rockefeller’s
recommended position called upon JFK to make an “irrevocable” military commitment to
its allies in Southeast Asia and contemplate deploying troops in Laos should Communists
try to take it over. Only when America’s friends and foes knew the United States would
commit its troops to defend places like South Vietnam, would it cease to be a “paper tiger”
in the region.57

In October 1963, the Kennedy administration secretly sought to undermine the
Diem regime in the hope that new leadership and reforms would stabilize South
Vietnamese politics. To increase the pressure on Saigon, JFK announced the withdrawal
of one thousand American advisors by year-end.58 Kissinger argued that attacking Diem
was counterproductive to defeating the Vietcong and that even a token withdrawal of
American forces would give credence to the Communist notion “that if they hold out long

Subseries 1964 Presidential Election, Series 17.1 Issue Books, RG 15 NAR Gubernatorial, RFA, RAC;
Presidential Election, Series 17.1 Issue Books, RG 15 NAR Gubernatorial, RFA, RAC; and Current Positions
Notebook, “Southeast Asia—General,” 10/25/1962, folder 61, Box 11, Subseries 1964 Presidential Election,
Series 17.1 Issue Books, RG 15 NAR Gubernatorial, RFA, RAC.
58 Logevall, Choosing War, 69-71.
enough, they are bound to prevail.” Kissinger worried that if South Vietnam fell, it would demoralize allies, cause more dominoes to fall in Southeast Asia, and weaken America’s global influence. He instructed Rockefeller to attack Kennedy on these points, but Diem’s November 2 assassination preempted this tentative statement. Kissinger condemned the White House’s role in the coup. By deposing an ally through “cynical and brutal methods,” Kissinger wrote, “the prestige and good faith in the U.S. is [now] irrevocably engaged.” The United States had to do whatever was necessary to preserve the Republic of Vietnam lest its credibility abroad be forever tarnished. Of course, as the Democrats’ credibility gap widened between their optimistic predictions and the realities in Vietnam, the political opportunity for a Republican challenger in 1964 improved.59

Since 1960, Rockefeller, with Kissinger’s guidance, had been preparing himself for the Republican nomination, and Kissinger argued that South Vietnam’s political instability and deteriorating military situation provided the ideal proof of Kennedy and Johnson’s failures abroad. In January 1964, Kissinger pleaded with Rockefeller to issue his statement on Southeast Asia because the situation there “is bad and likely to get worse. You would therefore take a leadership position. Sooner or later this is bound to become a [political] issue.” Promises of withdrawal, though popular with voters, would hurt South Vietnamese morale and so should be avoided. Kissinger again reasoned, failure in Vietnam would jeopardize the whole of Southeast Asia and could “convince our most trusted allies that our

leadership is ineffective—that we have neither the power nor the will to back up our word.”

As the campaign season approached, Kissinger’s language grew more militant. Kissinger recommended escalating the war by having the South Vietnamese attack Vietcong logistics and sanctuaries in Laos while the United States bombed North Vietnam. For his April 27 “Statement on Vietnam,” Rockefeller removed Kissinger’s line calling “for a full commitment, here and now, to victory in Southeast Asia” but kept the bulk of his suggestions. Rockefeller stated that American airstrikes against North Vietnam “could end the Vietcong aggression by making clear to its immediate sponsor, the government of North Vietnam, that no longer will it be immune from the devastation of the war it has begun.” Like Laird and Nixon, Kissinger and Rockefeller argued bombing the North would help end the guerrilla war in the South. Rockefeller similarly posited that the South Vietnamese people would have to take the lead; it was still their war to fight.

Kissinger continued to emphasize South Vietnamese responsibility for defeating the insurgency while considering some U.S. role on the ground. He maintained that President Johnson must act before the general election to increase the size and effectiveness of South Vietnamese forces but Kissinger continued to consider the use of American soldiers. To contain China and defend Southeast Asia, Kissinger believed the president should launch a new regional initiative, backed by a congressional resolution. The

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60 Memo, HAK to NAR, “Statement on Southeast Asia,” 1/10/1964, folder 183, Box 31, Subseries: 1 General Correspondence, Series: J2 Politics—George Hinman Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.

president could then deploy “substantial armed forces near threatened areas” as proof of America’s commitment, but Kissinger remained unclear whether these troops should intervene in Vietnam. Of course, Kissinger’s proposed policies on Vietnam would come to naught if his advisee failed to capture the Republican nomination.62

Unfortunately for Kissinger, moderate Rockefeller was out of step with the conservative fervor then sweeping the GOP. In 1962, Kissinger recognized that conservatism was a growing force in Republican politics and that Rockefeller had to reach out to the party’s right wing with his hardline foreign policy and distinct brand of dynamic conservatism before a libertarian like Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater stole their hearts.63 Since 1960, Goldwater had been building a national grassroots, conservative movement that paid political dividends in 1964. Rockefeller competed well in open primaries, but Goldwater did well in the caucus states and the South. Rockefeller needed winner-take-all California to have a competitive number of delegates at the convention, but Goldwater’s grassroots mobilization carried him to a narrow victory—51.6 percent to 48.4 percent. Defeat did not translate into lost influence, though, as the bitter divide between Republican moderates and conservatives would make for an acrimonious convention with factions feuding over the party platform.64

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63 Memo, HAK to NAR, 12/28/1962, folder 183, Box 31, Subseries 1 General Correspondence, Series J2 Politics—George Hinman Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC; memo, HAK to NAR, 11/18/1960, folder 184, Box 31, Subseries 1 General Correspondence, Series J2 Politics—George Hinman Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.

Ever the shrewd politician, Laird chose the task of drafting the platform to both ameliorate tensions and aggrandize his own political power. Political commentators Stephen Hess and David Broder rightly noted that by “choosing the platform committee as his arena, [Laird] sought power and gained it.” Laird recognized that Rockefeller and Goldwater shared similar views on international relations and so recruited Kissinger to help write the foreign policy sections of the plank. Indicative of their shared anticommunism, Laird’s draft affirmed that the “overriding foreign policy goal must be victory over Communism” while Kissinger argued the United States must live up to its word and resist “aggression wherever and whenever it occurs.” Laird made no mention of Indochina in his draft, but Kissinger irrevocably bound America to South Vietnam, demonstrating how close Goldwater and Rockefeller’s positions really were. For Kissinger, the GOP plank should state Vietnam’s importance in terms of the domino theory and call upon America to “make a public and demonstrated commitment to victory in South Vietnam,” giving “all practical support” to the Vietnamese. Kissinger’s suggestions reflected the common Republican hope that airstrikes against North Vietnam and Laos would stop Hanoi’s sponsorship of the guerrilla war and so end the Vietcong insurgency.

The final platform retained this patriotic bellicosity. If elected, Goldwater would work to defeat Communism and advance freedom. Though Laird dropped Kissinger’s calls

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66 Laird had long been an admirer of Kissinger, even having him write a chapter of his 1963 work *The Conservative Papers*. This collaboration illuminated their shared thinking on foreign issues in the context of Republican politics. See Van Atta, *With Honor*, 63-64.

for bombing (presumably to appease party doves and avoid alienating voters), the platform made America’s commitment clear. “We will move decisively to assure victory in South Vietnam.” After the convention, Kissinger wrote a sad but reflective letter to Rockefeller, bemoaning the conservative extremism that had derailed the candidacy of a noble statesman. Yet, on Vietnam, Kissinger and Rockefeller were in complete congruence with Goldwater. America must forcefully and decisively win the war in Vietnam.68

Though Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger shared this sentiment, they were out of step with the country. At the time of the 1964 GOP convention, 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 did, Republican doves were numerous and outspoken. Representative Eugene Siler (R-KY) pledged to run for president and if elected immediately withdraw all American forces from Southeast Asia. Senator John Sherman Cooper (R-KY) was a notable dove who constantly urged Kennedy and later Johnson to negotiate a settlement in Vietnam. Furthermore, the press editorial writers 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.69 Meanwhile, the American people remained apathetic towards Vietnam. Historian Fredrik Logevall accurately assessed the

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69 Mann, Grand Delusion, 306.
situation, “For most Americans, Vietnam remained a place and an issue of which they knew little and cared less.” Thus, the trio’s preference for immediate escalation was contrary to the wishes of most Americans.  

The August 2, 1964 North Vietnamese attack on the USS Maddox off the North Vietnamese coast in the Gulf of Tonkin as well as the presumed skirmish two days later temporarily changed the domestic mood. For the first time, President Johnson authorized limited U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam and proposed a congressional resolution empowering him to expand the war. Believing North Vietnam had brazenly attacked America twice in the Gulf of Tonkin, Congress and the public rallied around the flag and the resolution. Autumn 1964 was a period of widespread support for LBJ’s policy of minimal escalation and “measured response,” and his handling of the Gulf of Tonkin incident neutralized Vietnam as a campaign issue. He convinced most Americans that he would continue to prosecute the war without committing additional men and resources. LBJ won the general election by a landslide, receiving over sixty percent of the popular vote. Johnson had gained the political freedom to chart his own path in Vietnam, but most Americans soon returned to apathy towards war in a faraway, Asian land. 

In spite of Johnson’s tentative escalation and a public preference for peace, Laird and Nixon called for an expanded war, deriding LBJ’s gradualism as more Democrat half-heartedness. Laird thought Johnson’s policy of “measured response” was inadequate. He urged the president to widen the war and “take whatever steps are necessary to win the

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71 Herring, America’s Longest War, 142-145; and Logevall, Choosing War, 242, 281-282, 288.
war…within a reasonable period of time.” Unlike most Americans, Laird remained 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 completely. Nixon left no room for retreat but pressed for greater bombing. Nixon explained to an Australian audience, “We have to do whatever is necessary to assure the independence and the right of self-determination of the people of South Vietnam….In my own view, it will not require going further than defeating the Vietcong within Vietnam and bringing enough pressure through aerial strikes on Northern Vietnam so that they will quit helping the Vietcong in the South.” Thus, after Tonkin, Nixon and Laird continued to demand further escalation of the Vietnam conflict.

In short, from 1961-1964, Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger adapted their anticommunist strategies to the explosive situation in Southeast Asia. They each stood squarely against the neutralization of Laos. They repeatedly urged the White House to stand with the South Vietnamese, building up their military and supporting their operations with American firepower.

Meanwhile, they made political gain in exposing what they perceived to be Democratic weakness. In part, Laird built his congressional reputation and power as a partisan hawk. Nixon rebuilt his political career from the shambles of the 1962 California governor’s race by attacking the Democrats’ record in Asia. And Kissinger expressed his

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73 “Four Corners-Sept. 11, 1965 Studio Interview with Mr. Richard Nixon,” 1964, PPS 347:7:18, RNLBF.
escalatory policies through Kennedy and Johnson’s would-be Republican challenger, Nelson Rockefeller. President Johnson’s retaliatory airstrikes after Tonkin signaled a move in their direction, but they were all dissatisfied with anything short of complete military victory. Looking ahead, Kissinger rightly predicted, “The country is heading for troubled times.” The deteriorating situations at home and in Vietnam would afford them each further political opportunities.\textsuperscript{74}

\textbf{1965-1967, the War They Wanted & the War They Accepted}

President Lyndon Johnson, having won the 1964 election in a landslide that rejected Republicans’ militant stand on Vietnam, Americanized the war in 1965 by sending an increasing number of U.S. soldiers into the jungles of Vietnam. The year began with approximately 23,000 military personnel in South Vietnam and ended with 184,000.\textsuperscript{75} Laird, Nixon, and Kissinger had been pushing Johnson to do more since he took office, but Johnson’s war was not what they had in mind.

Richard Nixon and Melvin Laird were certainly the most outspoken Republican hawks. In principle and in rhetoric, both opposed the deployment of American troops, preferring the use of air and naval power. Even as LBJ slowly adopted their bombing policies, they derided him for doing too little. During this period, Nixon launched a full effort to take the White House. In a bevy of world trips, articles, editorials, and speeches, Nixon attacked Johnson’s policies while goading him to do more. But his emphasis remained on bombing North Vietnam and building up South Vietnamese forces to deal

\textsuperscript{74} Letter, HAK to NAR, 1964, folder 967, Box 101, Series L-Projects, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.

\textsuperscript{75} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 182.
with the Vietcong. Only in late 1967 did Nixon begin to tone down his language in order to establish his image as a statesman, not a political infighter.

Laird was the first of the three to moderate his rhetoric, though. While Nixon and Kissinger reluctantly accepted Johnson’s Americanization, Laird opposed it at every turn, frustrating the President. Johnson barked at Laird’s close friend, Michigan Representative Gerald Ford, “You ought to get a muzzle on Laird and make him quit telling me that I can’t have ground troops I need to protect my own airplanes. Because I can’t bomb like he wants to if the goddamned Vietcong are destroying my airplanes on the ground.”

Laird similarly disagreed with LBJ on negotiations, especially regarding the latter’s proposed six-month timetable for the mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces. According to Laird, the South Vietnamese needed more time and U.S. assistance than a speedy, negotiated exit would allow. From 1965-1967, Laird stood by the Republic of Vietnam as solidly as ever, but his pessimism grew the longer the war continued and the more he believed that Johnson was seeking a negotiated settlement that would fail to ensure South Vietnam’s survival. While urging Johnson to stay the course, Laird’s speeches grew more somber as he feared a settlement would result in a Communist takeover. By mid-1967, he declared, “I am neither a ‘hawk’ nor a ‘dove’ on Vietnam but rather a pessimist.”

This Vietnam War was not the one he had been advocating since 1962.

As the war heated up, Henry Kissinger and Nelson Rockefeller became relatively quiet on Vietnam. Rockefeller gave no major speeches on Vietnam in 1966 or 1967, and the frequency of Kissinger’s memos reduced to a trickle. Kissinger supported LBJ’s

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policies publicly but privately feared the White House and the generals were overemphasizing the military to the detriment of the political. They needed to stabilize South Vietnam by pacifying the countryside. Moreover, Kissinger was against negotiations until South Vietnam became relatively secure. Again, this conflict was not the limited war Kissinger had favored since the 1950s.

All three had emphasized the use of decisive airpower and indigenous defense, but President Johnson’s Americanization took the war in a different direction. Rather than abandon South Vietnam, they supported LBJ while demanding he do more. A poorly fought war in Vietnam could at least create political opportunities at home. After 1965, it became more difficult to reap the same political gains by attacking the President from the right. Nevertheless, they continued to do so even as they began moderating their harshest rhetoric. They each chose Johnson’s war over losing Vietnam.

After the disastrous 1964 elections, Laird and Nixon had their work cut out for them in reconstituting the Republican Party. Democratic gains in Congress and Johnson’s big win that November left Republican moderates and conservatives blaming each other for this outcome. This division only hardened in the House as Laird and Gerald Ford initiated an internal coup against senior Republican leadership. Ford came out as House Minority leader whereas Laird became the chairman of the Republican Conference, a position he used to consolidate his political power in the House by controlling appointments and organizing Republicans on certain issues. Both men, while relative moderates on domestic issues, were arch conservatives on foreign policy, leading many to speculate on the continued conservative ascendency within the GOP. Meanwhile, Nixon, who had campaigned prominently for Goldwater, continued to reach out toward the right, especially
through his uncompromising positions on Communism and Vietnam. Laird and Nixon moderated the extreme conservative rhetoric to make it politically palatable but they remained vocal hawks.⁷⁷

Laird and Nixon continued to press President Johnson to go for victory in Vietnam. Nixon began 1965 demanding LBJ do everything but use U.S. troops and nuclear weapons. On February 4, Laird stated his belief that most Americans did not support the president’s Vietnam policy and proposed the same policy he had been championing over the last few years. If America chose not to withdraw from Southeast Asia, the United States should use its air and naval power against Communist forces in the region, an alternative then favored by only 18 percent of Americans.⁷⁸ Laird went on to make clear that his vision of escalation did not entail the use of U.S. ground troops. Although Nixon and Laird refused to waver in their stance on Vietnam, LBJ, reacting to events there, changed the nature of America’s commitment to South Vietnam in early 1965.⁷⁹

The February 7, 1965 National Liberation Front (NLF) attack on the U.S. army base at Pleiku in the central highlands of South Vietnam provided the excuse for President Johnson’s further escalation of the war. 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

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⁷⁸ Harris polls quoted in Logevall, Choosing War, 282.
action, the Johnson administration chose to institute a gradual bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Pleiku was merely the pretext for this action.\(^{80}\)

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 war in South Vietnam. Logevall wrote, “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.” Even among those members of Congress who harbored doubts about the war, very few were willing to oppose the president publicly. So as Johnson gradually Americanized the Vietnam War, Congress did little to challenge him. To the degree that it existed, the domestic consensus feared a major war was in the making but remained willing to follow the president’s lead.\(^{81}\)

Meanwhile, hawkish Republican leaders intensified their pressure on LBJ to continue escalating the war. In a private letter to Goldwater, Nixon wondered whether LBJ’s actions after Pleiku “may not be an adequate follow-through. I think we must continue to urge that the United States make a command decision to use whatever air and sea power is necessary to cut off the flow of arms and men from North Viet Nam into South Viet Nam.”\(^{82}\) On February 17, Laird along with other bellicose Republicans in the House and Senate issued a statement endorsing Johnson’s recent air strikes against North Vietnam. In the joint statement, they wrote, “If we have any difference with the President

\(^{80}\) Herring, America’s Longest War, 152-154.
\(^{81}\) Logevall, Choosing War, 360-361; and Mann, Grand Delusion, 408-412, 414.
in this respect, it is the belief these measures might have been used more frequently since 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. For Laird in particular, negotiations would result in Communist domination. Should the United States desire a negotiated settlement, then it had just as well pull out of South Vietnam.83

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.” In reality, the president conditioned such negotiations on the continued independence of South Vietnam, but his rhetoric ruffled the feathers of outspoken hawks. Yet, once again, Johnson’s true position was much closer to those who favored a wider war.84

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 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 NLF. 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.85

Without question, LBJ agreed with Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger on the value of South Vietnam in terms of credibility, Cold War strategy, and domestic politics but he faced the reality of a rapidly deteriorating situation. There were no easy answers, and unlike his opponents, Johnson could not offer up simple platitudes and political attacks. Building up the South Vietnamese military with U.S. advisors and aid had failed. An all-out bombing of North Vietnam would invite criticism at home and abroad and risk provoking Soviet or Chinese intervention. Sending in large numbers of American boys seemed the only answer, but as LBJ lamented to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, “What human being knows [how many men that will take]?” Johnson rationalized that they were not trying to get out or end the war with troops, simply “trying to hold what we got. And…we’re losing, at the rate we’re going….We want to come in there and do everything we can [so] that the Vietnamese…will have enough people to resist it. When they can’t resist it and they’re overrun, why, we got to carry in men to help them.”

85 Herring, America’s Longest War, 155, 157-160.
Weighing the risk of Soviet and Chinese intervention as well as the domestic costs against his faith in American firepower and soldiers, LBJ chose to escalate gradually the air and ground war rather than adopting the Republicans’ all-out approach. Vietnam defied simple solutions, but this path seemed to minimize the political and military perils while offering the hope of a quick victory. Negotiations then were a ploy to buy Johnson the time necessary to secure South Vietnam and demonstrate to Hanoi that they could not win.86

Nevertheless, Melvin Laird saw Johnson’s pro-negotiation rhetoric as a turning point. Laird believed military victory was no longer an alternative, leaving only a negotiated settlement or withdrawal. In a 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.” Laird now 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.87 President Johnson should expend American bombs rather than American lives to achieve a negotiated settlement.88

86 Beschloss, Reaching for Glory, 352-353.
87 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.
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. 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. Like other Americans, Laird could only express his “hope that we will not drift into a major land war in Southeast Asia.”

Richard Nixon shared Laird’s opposition to Johnson’s commitment of troops. Nixon toured Asia in August and September to cultivate his domestic image as a world statesman, but his personal notes provide insight into the consistency of his Vietnam views in the midst of Johnson’s Americanization of the war. As Nixon visited South Vietnam, he still believed “Vietnam [was] worth saving” and that the U.S. objectives were to “deny any reward for aggression” and build up Vietnamese forces so that they can handle the insurgency. In this immediate crisis though, South Vietnam needed more American and Asian troops, and RN believed they would have to stay for at least two years. Yet, he emphasized, “We must put Vietnamese in front or we stay forever.” Nixon’s proposed policy was not, nor had it ever been, synonymous with LBJ’s massive intervention of U.S. soldiers. Instead, Nixon advocated massive bombing of the North and developing South

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Vietnamese self-defense. Only once South Vietnam’s survival was in jeopardy and after Johnson had committed large numbers of troops, did Nixon begin clamoring for even greater deployments of U.S. forces.\textsuperscript{90}

In late 1965, Nixon too opposed negotiations. That fall, Nixon went on record as saying that negotiations should only involve the unilateral withdrawal of Communist forces and agreement on the Republic of Vietnam’s legitimacy. In a December \textit{Reader’s Digest} article, Nixon argued, “Victory is now possible, but it is not imminent,” taking at least two more years of hard fighting. Any negotiated settlement at this time would undermine victory; negotiations should only begin once South Vietnam was secure. To get Communists to negotiate fairly, Nixon wrote, “We must convince them that they cannot win,” implying the use of military means to achieve a diplomatic solution. In sum, LBJ’s simultaneous call for negotiations and increasing Americanization of the ground war went against Nixon and Laird’s foreign policy principles. Communists could not be trusted, America must defend South Vietnam, and U.S. boys should never be sent overseas when other means (air and naval) remained available.\textsuperscript{91}

Henry Kissinger had similar difficulty with the Americanization of the Vietnam War. He, more than Laird or Nixon, strongly supported LBJ’s commitment of troops in 1965 and wrote to administration officials to convey his support for Johnson’s policies because they represented “the proper mixture of firmness and flexibility.” In October, Kissinger traveled to South Vietnam to view the situation. Kissinger concluded that the

\textsuperscript{90} RN, Handwritten Notes for Saigon Press Backgrounder, 1965, PPS 347:7:12, RNLBF.

conflict was primarily a civil war between the South Vietnamese government and the Vietcong and that U.S. tactics were inappropriate for the situation. Military leaders needed to focus on the political aspects of the war by protecting the population from Vietcong assassinations and terrorism. Only then could real nation-building begin. More than Nixon or Laird, Kissinger recognized that military force was not a silver bullet capable of ending the insurgency, but he continued to affirm the goal of preserving the Republic of Vietnam. Johnson’s intervention had staked American credibility to South Vietnam’s survival. For Kissinger, America had no choice but to continue the war, and so he would continue to support the war in spite of the serious flaws in strategy.  

Thus, Johnson’s Vietnam policy put Republican hawks in a difficult position. Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird 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 principles and abandoned South Vietnam. Republican leadership chose the former alternative but they did not do so enthusiastically. As Laird often pointed out during Johnson’s Americanization of the war, “Support for a policy is not necessarily synonymous with enthusiastic approval of that policy.”  

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92 Isaacson, Kissinger, 117-118; memorandum of conversation, HAK, 10/27/1965, folder “Professor H. Kissinger-1965,” Box 9, E-5408, RG 59, NAIL; and HAK, White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 232-234.

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 won them over to the South Vietnamese cause. Rather, as author Thomas Powers noted, 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.

Nixon was not so naïve. In 1966 he continued to advocate increased military pressure against Hanoi and for deploying more U.S. troops to South Vietnam. Before a group of Seattle Republican fundraisers that winter, Nixon declared that America was in Vietnam to prevent the North Vietnamese from conquering the South “by support of

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revolution” and that their victory there would spur Communist aggression elsewhere. Nixon reaffirmed that the United States and its allies would win. Privately, Nixon noted that defending South Vietnam could be a “25 year task” and worried whether the American people had that kind of stamina. He concluded, “[We] must win quickly—U.S. will not tolerate long war.” Again, his solution was to build up the South Vietnamese while American soldiers provided a temporary breathing space and U.S. airpower coerced Hanoi to settle. Nixon wrote, “We should help people fight but never fight war for them.” In July, Nixon considered the situation in Vietnam so perilous that he called on LBJ to raise the number of American soldiers there from 287,000 to 500,000 while bombing North Vietnam, but he continued to bemoan Americanization as the wrong approach. In speeches and newspaper editorials, Nixon demanded Johnson do the impossible—increase American troops without turning South Vietnam into a dependency. Nixon also urged LBJ to create a “Pacific Charter” predicated on the regional sharing of the military burden so that America would not have to sustain Asian defense almost entirely on its own. America did not have the resources or the patience to wage a unilateral war in Southeast Asia.96

Privately, Kissinger understood the difficulty South Vietnam faced in building a society amidst a terrible civil war, but publicly, he defended the conflict as fervently as Nixon. In 1965, Kissinger noted, “There is no purely military solution to guerrilla war” and that organic governments were exceedingly difficult to develop while being attacked by insurgents. Kissinger sympathized with the South Vietnamese Foreign Minister’s

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concerns about anarchy and told him that it had taken the West centuries to develop stable democracies, implying that American intellectuals and politicians should be more patient with the Vietnamese. In the August 9 issue of *Look* magazine, its editors questioned Kissinger, “Suppose the President asked you what should we do now?” In response to the question, Kissinger explained the political and psychological factors at work in Vietnam and prioritized them over the military. Kissinger stressed the need to “build political structures” and pacify the South Vietnamese countryside. He assumed that as the allies dismantled the Communist political apparatus in South Vietnam and defeated the Vietcong, Hanoi would begin negotiations. But, he took the unequivocal position that America must prevail in Vietnam. He charged, “We are no longer fighting in Vietnam only for the Vietnamese. We are also fighting for ourselves and for international stability.” He continued, “Withdrawal would be disastrous.” It would demoralize America’s Southeast Asian allies, encourage Communist adventurism abroad, and gravely damage U.S. credibility. Kissinger concluded, “A demonstration of American impotence in Asia cannot fail to lessen the credibility of American pledges in other fields. The stability of areas geographically far removed from Vietnam will be basically affected by the outcome here.” Kissinger ended with an appeal to Americans to take the mature course and see the war through in spite of the difficult road that lay ahead.97

Representative Laird agreed with Nixon and Kissinger on the domestic limitations but was far more pessimistic about the situation in Vietnam. LBJ had chosen a ground

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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 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 stated goal, and even as Laird began to support negotiations, he remained committed to the preservation of the Republic of Vietnam. 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.” Laird was not against Communists who came to power via free elections, though he believed it would be several years before South Vietnam could hold meaningful elections. Instead, Laird was against a negotiated

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settlement that gave Communists a stake in a coalition government they had not won in free elections.  

The conclusions of the October 1966 Manila Conference between America and its allies in Vietnam discouraged Laird just as the Laotian settlement and Johns Hopkins speech had done before. 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.  

Meanwhile, Nixon charged that the “Manila formula” of mutual withdrawal would be tantamount to abandoning South Vietnam. The departure of U.S. and allied foreign forces would leave the Republic at the mercy of Vietcong insurgents, and given Communist perfidy, North Vietnam would soon renew its infiltration after American troops left. Nixon’s words provoked President Johnson into publicly ridiculing Nixon as a “chronic campaigner,” but this attention only bolstered Nixon’s image as an informed critic and statesman. Nixon continued to favor the use of “maximum military force” by escalating the war using air and naval assets without increasing the number of troops, and he attacked LBJ at every opportunity. As Nixon crisscrossed the country campaigning for other

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Republican candidates, he tied his political future to the resurrection of the Republican Party in the 1966 midterm elections and he continued to rely on Johnson’s Vietnam War as a foil that would help sweep them all into office.\textsuperscript{101}

Indeed, Republicans openly criticized the Democrats’ handling of the conflict. Even as Melvin Laird pledged to keep Vietnam out of politics, he charged the Johnson administration with making it an issue by deciding war policy “with an eye for domestic political considerations.” Laird and his Republican Conference’s White Paper on Vietnam brought this accusation front and center. Republicans argued that LBJ freely 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 tract 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.”\textsuperscript{102} 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.” Nevertheless, Republicans generally sought to avoid playing politics with the war during the election campaign, choosing to target the sum of Johnson’s policies rather than just Vietnam. Their White Paper failed to

\textsuperscript{101} Johns, \textit{Vietnam’s Second Front}, 114-116, 125-127; and transcript of NBC Television Program Sunday, 11/6/1966, PPS 208:89:2, RNLBF.
espouse any positive alternative to Johnson’s tactics, indicating that a lack of answers was one reason why Republicans largely avoided the Vietnam issue in the 1966 election.103

Democrats also made a conscientious decision to sidestep 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.” 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 public appearances. Democratic candidates left President Johnson to defend his own Vietnam policies while they campaigned on other issues.104

With nearly 400,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam and over 5,000 American soldiers killed in action that year alone, it is surprising that the public did not make the Vietnam War the campaign issue. Americans frequently told Gallup pollsters that Vietnam was the most important problem facing the United States.105 Given its virtual absence from the election, journalist James Reston rightfully asked, “What happened to the Vietnam issue?”106

Democrats and Republicans were able to avoid Vietnam because 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.

Pundits did interpret GOP gains as proof of Nixon’s return from the political wilderness. With Americans increasingly turning against President Johnson’s domestic and foreign policies, the old “chronic campaigner” might have another win in him. Nixon himself appreciated how far he had come as well as the national uncertainty regarding Vietnam. He would increasingly gravitate towards a negotiated peace even as he left the option of decisive military victory on the table. In 1967, his actions, his words, and the changing situation in Vietnam could make or break his candidacy.\(^\text{107}\)

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 the 1966 rate.\(^\text{108}\) The war overseas intensified the culture war going on within the United States by providing a very public and controversial issue for people to disagree. Millions of Americans began turning against the war, and thousands of them began participating in antiwar 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


\(^{108}\) Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 267.
support for the war. Historian Thomas Powers wrote, “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.¹⁰⁹

Of the three men, Laird harbored the most doubts but stood by the Republic of 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 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. He 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 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. With Americans 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.¹¹⁰

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 thought the war had become almost entirely an American conflict and that the South Vietnamese government remained unable to defend itself from the Vietcong. Furthermore, Laird believed 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. On a trip back to Wisconsin in March, Laird told his constituents that he saw “no real chance for a U.S. military victory in

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Vietnam.”112 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, the way Laird framed the dilemma pointed to a possible solution: prepare South Vietnamese forces to handle the Communist insurgency and then negotiate 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. Laird’s Vietnamization program was a future development, though. In 1967, he confined himself to putting political pressure on President Johnson to continue the war with greater sanctions against North Vietnam.113

Driven by the hawks on one hand and frustration on the other, LBJ had indeed greatly expanded and escalated the air campaign against North Vietnam. He increasingly removed restrictions on bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, but the hawks demanded more. Yet, there were a growing number of doves within the GOP. Eyeing 1968, Nixon could have gravitated towards the center but he, like the president, remained as set on victory as ever.114

Nixon was relatively silent on domestic politics during the first half of 1967 choosing instead to travel the world to burnish his image as a statesman. These trips afforded the appearance of a leader reexamining the international situation, but Nixon’s views remained unchanged. In Europe, Nixon noted that the world was entering a “period

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of pragmatism” and possible détente but that the United States should maintain its strategic superiority because Communists only “talk because of our strength.” Nixon’s April assessment of South Vietnam differed little from his prior visits—escalation and greater South Vietnamese participation remained the solution. To shorten the war, Johnson needed to increase U.S. troops, propaganda, bombing, and pacification while rallying the American people to this vital cause. Again emphasizing indigenous defense, Nixon wrote, “No easy outs; get Asians to fight.” True to his fixation on escalation, though, Nixon read Laird’s July “Vietnam pessimist” speech but only highlighted the portions that indicated Laird’s approval for the use of air and naval power. Even with Johnson ratcheting up the war in Vietnam, bombing remained Nixon’s panacea.115

While Nixon was playing the statesman, Henry Kissinger, with his reputation as a renowned Cold War strategist, found himself in the middle of Johnson administration attempts at negotiations from fall 1966 through late 1967. At the September 1966 Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs in Poland, Czech officials approached Kissinger in the hope that he could become their White House contact in their effort to act as the mediator between Hanoi and Washington. The initiative quickly proved stillborn because North Vietnam had no interest in negotiations but it confirmed Kissinger’s status as a potential intermediary in any secret negotiations. The following June at the Pugwash Conference in Paris, Kissinger again found himself with the opportunity to act as Johnson’s representative. Kissinger offered to contact Ho Chi Minh through two French confidants.

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, increasingly eager to find some end to the war, supported Kissinger’s efforts. Later known as the “Pennsylvania Peace Initiative,” this effort proposed a bombing halt in exchange for Ho’s assurance that North Vietnamese infiltration would stop. Once Hanoi met these conditions, LBJ would cap troop levels and open formal negotiations. Kissinger enjoyed the limelight and wanted negotiations to commence, but Johnson remained dubious. Right before the peace mission was to begin, Johnson launched another bombing campaign against North Vietnam, ending whatever small chance Pennsylvania had at success.¹¹⁶

Kissinger’s role in these negotiations proved he was as hawkish as ever. After the initiative had come to naught, Kissinger urged the president to give Hanoi another chance at peace while using the channel to signal his growing impatience. If they rejected this offer, Johnson could publicize their intransigence to quiet “more responsible” American doves and “resume full-scale activities” against North Vietnam—the very policy Kissinger would advocate in 1969. In short, Kissinger did not see negotiations as an opportunity to compromise with Hanoi and get America out of Vietnam. Instead, he assumed the talks would fail and hoped Johnson would use Hanoi’s intransigence to justify further escalation. Regardless, Kissinger’s prominence in these events alerted him to the fact that the Johnson administration was moving toward negotiations. For his benefactor and friend Nelson

Rockefeller to have a shot at the White House in 1968, Rockefeller would have to outflank Johnson by softening his Vietnam rhetoric.117

While Kissinger was still working with the White House, he sent Rockefeller a memo outlining a new Vietnam policy. The memo was a draft Q/A statement explaining why Rockefeller had abandoned his support for LBJ’s Vietnam policies. Reflecting Kissinger’s recent anger over Pennsylvania, it derided the White House for attempting negotiations and escalation simultaneously and blamed Johnson for “a slackening of progress in Vietnam and a quickening of debate in the United States.” Kissinger rejected both unilateral withdrawal and military victory—“Our path falls, then, between these extremes: a limited use of power to secure a compromise settlement.” Rockefeller was to propose a “clear and hold” pacification strategy that encouraged the development of indigenous political structures and legitimized the South Vietnamese government. Rockefeller would focus bombing on supply routes but only reduce sorties against Hanoi once they began to limit their infiltration into the South. Negotiated peace became Rockefeller’s goal, but Kissinger was not advocating Vietnamization or a “decent interval” strategy of delaying South Vietnam’s collapse until American credibility was no longer on the line. Kissinger predicted American forces would remain in South Vietnam at their present level through 1970. Thus, Kissinger intended this posturing to establish Rockefeller’s credentials as a peace with honor candidate even though Kissinger noted he would declare, “I am not and will not be a candidate for the Republican Presidential

117 Memo, HAK, before 10/18/1967, #13, folder “Pennsylvania (continued),” Box 140, Country File—Vietnam, NSF, LBJPL; and Notes of the President’s Wednesday Night Meeting, Tom Johnson, 10/18/1967, #117a, folder “Oct. 18, 1967-7:30 p.m., Rusk, McNamara, Katzenbach, et al.,” Box 1, TJNM, LBJPL.
nomination next year.” Kissinger appreciated that in American politics, a refusal to run could make a candidate almost irresistible.\textsuperscript{118}

Richard Nixon also had his eyes on the political prize and softened his aggressive rhetoric to broaden his appeal and establish his image as a moderate statesman. The Republican Party included a growing number of doves, and Nixon needed to unite the party on Vietnam to win the nomination and avoid a repeat of 1964’s ugly divisiveness. Though hamstrung by his “brainwashing” in Vietnam comment, Michigan governor and Republican candidate George Romney identified Nixon’s problem, “Nixon is a hawk and the Republican Party may not want to be the hawk party of 1968.” Laird too appreciated this political calculus and argued that campaigning as the peace party was the surest ticket to electoral victory. So long as their candidate appeared more dovish on the war than the Democrats, Laird thought that the GOP had a good chance of winning the election. Aware of the changing Republican and public mood toward the war, Nixon began to move away from his hardline positions while staying true to his principles.\textsuperscript{119}

Nixon’s October 1967 \textit{Foreign Affairs} article, “Asia after Vietnam,” symbolized both this transformation and continuity. His words on reaching out to China and bringing it into “the family of nations” grabbed so much attention that people overlooked (and continue to overlook) his restatement of the core principles that prefigured Vietnamization


and the Nixon Doctrine. First, Nixon strongly defended America’s commitment to Vietnam. The conflict there shielded other Asian nations from Communist expansion, giving them time to develop. Conversely, the Vietnam War, along with troubles at home, divided Americans and made future interventions uncertain. Nixon lamented, “Weary with war, disheartened with allies, disillusioned with aid, dismayed at domestic crises, many Americans are heading the call of the new isolationism.” As a result, the United States can no longer act as the all-powerful world policeman. In the future, American policymakers would have to predicate military support on the threatened nation’s ability to defend itself, or if they could not, U.S. aid would only come after the region as a whole had petitioned it. In sum, Nixon emphasized regional military pacts and Asian self-defense. The United States would help strengthen nations to contain Communism but it would not fight their wars for them. Nixon had been expounding on this theme for nearly two decades, but in the midst of the Vietnam War, his openness to China and acknowledgement of the limits to U.S. power gave him the aura of a wise leader ready to lead his country in an uncertain age.¹²⁰

Yet, the new Nixon was not so different from the old Nixon; he would defend non-Communist South Vietnam and end the war by force if necessary. Nixon privately told one of his speechwriters that if he were president, he would authorize a thirty-day bombing halt. During this time, policymakers would launch an all-out diplomatic effort to begin substantive talks with Hanoi. If the North Vietnamese remained intransigent, Nixon would apply massive military pressure upon the North and threaten to use nuclear weapons against

them. Indeed, many of Nixon’s late 1967 speeches still championed the use of airpower and the need to prove American resolve in Vietnam even though he rejected widening the ground war with U.S. forces. Certainly, Nixon used this hard line to maintain his hold over the conservative wing of party, but like his views on Asian self-defense, it reflected his core beliefs. Nixon firmly believed a savage blow could break the Communist will to fight. American leaders need only have the will to galvanize the public and take the necessary steps to win. Nevertheless, to win the Republican nomination and then the election, Nixon tailored an ambiguous message on Vietnam that allowed him to appear all things to all people.¹²¹

Vietnam provided Richard Nixon with one additional political windfall—antiwar demonstrations. Race riots, drug use, violent crime, and youth culture congealed with antiwar protests into one great, white middle-class fear that their staid world was coming to an end. As far back as 1965, Nixon began capitalizing on this paranoia by making law and order his domestic focal point. Appealing to his audience’s patriotism, he verbally attacked antiwar students and professors who abused their freedom of speech by supporting the Vietcong. Nixon contrasted these dangerous radicals with the silent “consensus” of Americans who backed American aims in South Vietnam. By late 1967, Nixon was asking what was clearly on the majority’s mind, “What has happened to America?” Nixon alleged all of this wanton lawlessness stemmed from a loss of respect for authority and law. Jabbing away at Johnson in the pages of middle America’s favorite magazine, Reader’s Digest, Nixon wrote, “Far from being a great society, ours is becoming a lawless

Nixon encouraged national leaders to oppose anarchy and criminal behavior at every turn. In 1968, Nixon continued to develop his campaign’s law and order politics.

Always politically astute, Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger were looking to the 1968 election. Since 1965, they had viewed Johnson’s Vietnam policies with growing alarm and criticism. Though Kissinger was giving greater weight to the political factors at work in Vietnam, none of them would countenance abandoning South Vietnam. They still had a shared faith in American airpower and believed America should ask the South Vietnamese to do more to defend their country while giving them the aid and equipment to make this self-defense possible. Yet, they were universally opposed to de-escalation and unilateral withdrawal. Indeed, Nixon and Kissinger were advocating the same basic plan in late 1967—a temporary bombing halt and diplomatic offensive followed by massive airstrikes against North Vietnam if this diplomacy failed to bring productive talks. Nevertheless, for Laird to see his party recover after 1964’s losses and for Nixon or Rockefeller to win the Republican nomination and then defeat LBJ, they would all have to tack toward the doves.

Politically, escalation was losing its appeal. Twenty years of firm anticommunism and aggressive calls for using U.S. firepower in the Third World while developing local forces did not disappear, though. Thus, they sought political gains without jeopardizing the war in Vietnam. Before 1968, Vietnamization did not materialize out of thin air to solve their

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122 Appropriately, British military expert Sir Robert Thompson characterized Reader’s Digest as “the Bible of the silent majority.” See dispatch, Charles Johnston, Canberra, 3/10/1970, FCO 15/1351, PRO.
123 Perlstein, Nixonland, 73, 92, 216, 225; Black, Invincible Quest, 476, 479-480; Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, 30; and RN, “What Has Happened to America,” Reader’s Digest (reprint from October 1967), 1-3.
domestic political and South Vietnamese military dilemmas. To themselves and others, they appeared as statesmen, politicians, and strategists. But in 1968, they were three blind mice groping to find some way to achieve peace with honor.
2. Two Steps Forward, One Step Back:

De-Escalation & the Johnson Administration, January-August, 1968

“No President, at least not this President, makes a decision until he publicly announces that decision and acts upon it.” ~Lyndon B. Johnson¹²⁴

Although Nixon, Kissinger, and especially Laird viewed the Vietnam War with increasing pessimism, President Lyndon Johnson began 1968 with a fair amount of optimism. In the preceding months, he had heard glowing assessments of the war’s progress from his closest advisors and military leaders, which he then used to rally the public. LBJ could see the light at the end of the tunnel. Although the Johnson administration had a growing number of doves and pessimists, the president believed American troops would come home only as a result of significant progress in defeating the North Vietnamese, ideally leading to mutual withdrawal.

The Tet Offensive proved the President wrong and prompted policymakers to put a ceiling on the war effort. Before Tet, LBJ’s escalation of the war had only begun to taper off. Thereafter, Washington officials believed there was not enough domestic support to sustain an endlessly escalating war in Southeast Asia. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford and other policymakers made a concerted effort to cap the escalation, level off the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, and pursue serious negotiations with Hanoi. From April on, Clifford’s staff at the Department of Defense prepared and implemented plans to improve and modernize ARVN forces to fill manpower needs in Vietnam. Clifford even

considered new proposals to tie South Vietnamese expansion to unilateral U.S. reductions. But any change in American strategy required presidential approval.

Johnson’s March 31 speech and decision not to seek reelection announced the president’s tentative shift toward de-escalation, but it was only that. Contrary to the perception that Clifford held LBJ’s attention and moved him towards de-Americanization, there was no Vietnamization policy during Johnson’s tenure. Indeed, historians continue to argue that Nixon merely continued LBJ’s strategy for Vietnamizing the war. The historical record does not bear this conclusion out. Instead, Johnson vacillated between de-escalation and renewed or expanded bombing campaigns against North Vietnam. And as president, he rejected and ignored any proposal for unilaterally removing troops from Vietnam. Vietnamization’s precursors emerged out of post-Tet considerations, but LBJ kept every option on the table, save de-Americanization. He reconsidered military escalation and refused to countenance any withdrawal of U.S. soldiers. In its final months, the Johnson administration only leveled off America’s war effort.

January-March, Leveling Off

In 1967, U.S. officials contemplated some unilateral American troop reductions but policymakers based these prognostications on wildly optimistic assessments of the situation and they did not correlate these hopes with planning. That April, Robert Komer, head of U.S. pacification efforts in South Vietnam, recorded the need to expand and enrich South Vietnamese forces “as a substitute for more US forces.” Komer believed the United States was “already winning the war in the South” and could now “see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Soon, the improved situation on the ground in Vietnam would allow U.S. troop reductions. In October, Komer again wrote to the President, noting that the military
situation had continued to improve and that greater ARVN development and participation along with allied troop increases and greater bombing and efforts in North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos would only accelerate the march toward victory. The head of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), General William Westmoreland echoed Komer’s conclusions, telling President Johnson that continued success on the battlefield and ARVN improvements would allow U.S. redeployments as early as 1969. These views typified and reinforced Johnson administration confidence in late 1967. American troop withdrawals would come as a result of winding down a successful war in Southeast Asia.125

Among high-ranking officials, only Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was having serious doubts about the war but even he was not advocating unilateral de-escalation or withdrawal. Beginning in May 1967, McNamara argued that the Vietnam War was increasingly unpopular at home and was straining America’s social fabric. McNamara wrote Johnson, “All want the war ended and expect their President to end it.” The Secretary of Defense wanted the South Vietnamese to do more to defend their country while American policymakers capped U.S. troop numbers and redirected their efforts toward negotiations. But as McNamara himself noted, he was arguing for a “policy of stabilization,” not de-escalation. Even still, the Johnson administration reacted harshly against McNamara’s relatively quiescent skepticism.126

McNamara’s subsequent November 1 memo on leveling off the war precipitated a visceral response as the White House and its advisors lined up against the Secretary of

Defense and his policy. Johnson’s friend and confidant, Clark Clifford spoke for the majority when he asserted that Hanoi would interpret stabilization “to be exactly what it is. A resigned and discouraged effort to find a way out of a conflict for which we had lost our will and dedication.”127 Johnson also summoned America’s elite foreign policy experts and statesmen to Washington to hear their views. These Wise Men had played a key role in encouraging the Americanization of the war in 1965 and they stuck to this line in their meeting with LBJ. After hearing General Earle Wheeler’s briefing at this meeting, former Secretary of State Dean 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.”128 With the exception of the elderly diplomat W. Averell Harriman who was hoping to head any negotiating effort, the Wise Men were unanimous in their support for the war.129 LBJ undoubtedly received no small amount of comfort from these deliberations. He eventually dropped McNamara and proceeded to champion the war louder than ever.

For Johnson and the hawks, only domestic opinion could jeopardize America’s mission in Vietnam, and so in late 1967, President Johnson launched a propaganda campaign to silence his critics and increase popular support for the war. Johnson ordered General Westmoreland home to help assure Americans that the United States was winning the Vietnam War. LBJ also enlisted other top officials and politicians in his public relations “Progress Campaign.” President Johnson’s January 1968 State of the Union address

repeated this rosy view. Despite the enemy’s best efforts, the allies were making progress in Vietnam, defeating the aggressors “in battle after battle.” Administration efforts briefly convinced many Americans that there was light at the end of the tunnel, a perception the Tet Offensive shattered just two weeks later.  

For over six months, the North Vietnamese had been carefully planning the Tet Offensive, yet their goal was not American public opinion but decisive military victory. In 1967, Hanoi officials had bitterly divided on whether they should pursue negotiations while rebuilding the North or launch a general military offensive in South Vietnam. As the hardliners won out, they purged the moderates from the Communist party’s ranks. The now wholly militant Politburo decided in June that prolonged war would invite continued U.S. escalation and troop increases. They adopted an aggressive military strategy they hoped would enable them to rout South Vietnamese and American forces in 1968. The Tet Offensive was the consummation of this vision. Just as Johnson had decided to continue the fighting with the veneer of negotiations, the North Vietnamese appealed to the United States and world opinion for a bombing halt followed by serious negotiations, all the while readying Communist forces for the assumed final offensive. NLF leader Truong Cong Dong wrote in January, “The talks will begin when the Americans have inflicted defeat on us or when we have inflicted a defeat on them. Everything will be resolved on the battlefield.”


The Tet Offensive consisted of a preparatory phase followed by succeeding waves of offensives. The first phase 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 offensive—an all-out assault to capture and hold South Vietnamese cities. Hanoi hoped that this onslaught would incite a popular uprising against the South Vietnamese government, shatter America’s faith in achieving any meaningful victory, and achieve the military triumphs necessary to end the war on their terms with or without a negotiated settlement.132

Beginning January 30, 1968 and lasting for several weeks, the first wave of the general offensive 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. They anticipated some attacks but nothing close to a general offensive. With American forces deployed to rural areas after the 1967 attacks and ARVN soldiers returning home to visit their families during Tet, the 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

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132 Herring, America’s Longest War, 226-228.
pandemonium, American journalists captured images of U.S. personnel firing wildly into the compound. The embassy raid was short lived, though. 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.  

Tet’s greatest significance in America was that it shifted elite opinion, particularly in Washington. While individual members of the Johnson administration like McNamara had expressed concern over the war’s direction before, Tet awakened the foreign policy establishment and initiated a revaluation of the war. As historian David Schmitz noted, “The Tet Offensive created an atmosphere and space for alternative and dissenting views on the war in the State Department, CIA, and Department of Defense to be heard by the senior officials in the administration.” Before this tumultuous period in early 1968, most Washington officials had never seriously considered disengagement or unilateral withdrawal from the war. Afterwards, grim analyses increasingly bubbled up to top leaders, forcing them to confront the reality that they were not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. In February, Hanoi commentators rightly opined, “Indeed, the most widespread and significant victory of our Southern armed forces’ and people’s simultaneous attacks and general uprising is that they dealt the aggressive will of the Washington ruling clique a revolutionary blow.”

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McNamara’s replacement, Clark Clifford, epitomized this nascent pessimism and transformation. Clifford had been a staunch supporter of the Vietnam War up to Tet. In January, he told the Senate Armed Services Committee, “If there is any doubt at all about the ability of South Vietnam to defend itself, I would certainly cast my vote that we stay until we are sure that they can take care of themselves.” Just as it had for many other Americans, the Tet Offensive eroded his faith in the war effort. Yet, the advisors and analysts that surrounded Clifford in the Pentagon were just as critical to Clifford’s conversion from a hawk to a dove.

For those policymakers that had soured on the war, Tet provided the irrefutable proof the United States was in an endless stalemate, but they needed an audience and a bureaucratic flashpoint. The “McNamara men in the Pentagon” had long been internal critics of the war with Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Warnke being chief among them. Warnke believed American intervention in Vietnam had been a mistake and that military progress “was irrelevant, because we were not making any sort of political progress.” Warnke had influenced and at times directed McNamara’s abandonment of Johnson’s Vietnam policies; he now sought to do the same with Clifford. Like many of his peers, Warnke worried LBJ had appointed a hawkish crony, but because of Tet, Clifford was already agonizing over the war’s direction. Finally, General Westmoreland’s request for 206,000 more U.S. troops in Vietnam provided the controversy that forced the Pentagon to articulate and then advocate a strategy other than ongoing escalation. The Joint Chiefs

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135 Clifford testimony before Senate Armed Services Committee, 1/25/1968, “Historical Project-Background Paper by Sec. Clifford,” Box A72, LP, GFL.
believed that by playing up the emergency in South Vietnam they would galvanize Johnson into calling up the reserves, which would send more soldiers to Vietnam and replenish the nation’s pool of strategic manpower. Instead, this request initiated a bureaucratic stampede to rethink the level of America’s commitment to the Republic of Vietnam. 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. Warnke seized this opportunity and instructed his staff along with that of other departments to prepare papers reflecting the gloomy realities of the war. By sheer force of bureaucratic will and energy, perhaps they could convince Clifford and then Johnson to forsake their failed Vietnam policies.\textsuperscript{137}

If Clifford was still wavering in early March, a bevy of memos sought to convince the newly appointed Secretary of Defense that America’s strategy in Vietnam was gravely flawed. These reports variously sought to demonstrate that Tet had destroyed South Vietnamese efforts to control the countryside, an additional two hundred thousand American troops would make no discernible difference, and mining Haiphong and increasing the bombing of North Vietnam would never force Hanoi to negotiate. North Vietnam could match allied troop contributions to a man while sustaining the political will and resources necessary to continue the war despite severe and prolonged hardships. After taking all this information in, Clifford lamented, “We seem to have a sinkhole. We put in more—they match it….”\textsuperscript{137}

U.S. side and no end in sight to the action.”\footnote{Clark Clifford quoted in David M. Barrett, ed., 
	extit{Lyndon B. Johnson’s Vietnam Papers: A 
Documentary Collection} (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1997), 646 (italics in original).} On March 4, Clifford told Pentagon officials, “I want to give a whole new look at the whole situation,” and instructed them to continue reassessing Vietnam strategy, now with a view toward convincing President Johnson to change direction. In the interim, Clifford compromised with the hawks, agreeing to deploy an additional 22,000 men to South Vietnam. Nevertheless, Clifford had accepted Warnke’s belief that America was mired in a deadly stalemate and he would spend the remainder of his tenure as Secretary of Defense trying to proselytize others.\footnote{Andrew F. Krepinevich, 
	extit{The Army and Vietnam} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 242-244; Schmitz, 
(1 Feb 68-15 Mar 68) [1],” CCP, Box 26, LBJPL; draft memorandum for LBJ, 3/4/1968, 

Yet, domestic opinion and politics were as important to U.S. policymakers as events on the ground in South Vietnam. As the Tet Offensive continued, public support grew increasingly uncertain. 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. 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. Tet 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 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 anticommmunist 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, “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 troop request only increased 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. 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, like other social movements worldwide, it underwent a fundamental change. The October 1967 Pentagon siege was one of the most visible antiwar rallies prior to 1968. More than 30,000 protestors marched to the Pentagon, but only a handful of them engaged in violent demonstrations. The following year, many protestors abandoned 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 ended the possibility of compromise and encouraged the carnival of violence that characterized 1968.

Clifford’s advisors appreciated all of these domestic factors: public opinion, politics, unrest, as well as congressional sentiment. As one analyst noted, “The outcome of the war could well be determined by the evolution of opinion in this country during the

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balance of 1968.” Memos warned that escalation ran “great risks of provoking a domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions.” Under Secretary of the Air Force Townsend Hoopes wrote Clifford, arguing that not only was military victory “infeasible” but that “at the present level the war is eroding the moral fibre of the nation, demoralizing its politics, and paralyzing its foreign policy. A further manpower commitment to SVN would intensify the domestic disaffection, which would be reflected in increased defiance of the draft and widespread unrest in the cities.” Other memos rightly predicted that any escalation would anger the growing number of congressional doves. Indeed, in March, Fulbright’s assistant urged him “to take off the kid gloves” when questioning administration officials on Vietnam because “the majority of the American people are sick and tired of this war.”145 The head of LBJ’s reelection effort agreed with this last assessment, telling the president, “The fact is, hardly anyone today is interested in winning the war. Everyone wants to get out, and the only question is how.” But the hawks remained strong and any de-escalation could mean political attacks from Republican Richard Nixon and the right.146

Defense Department spokesman Phil Goulding accurately identified the problem, “No course of action will be a ‘consensus’ course. No action will unite the country, which is now fearfully divided.” Troop increases were “unpalatable” unless combined with either military escalation or a diplomatic offensive toward peace. Goulding suggested the only

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acceptable option to public opinion was to adopt a pacification strategy and begin U.S. troop withdrawals. This alternative would placate the public, reduce the prospects of student unrest, and staunch the tide of opinion from moving toward the doves. These domestic considerations ranked behind Clifford’s concerns over strategy and North Vietnamese persistence, but together these factors persuaded him that the United States had to change direction in Vietnam. As social turmoil rose and public support fell in 1968, Clifford predicated and sold his policies on America’s domestic problems.\footnote{Memo, Phil G. Goulding, c. 3/12/1968, #1b, folder “National Objectives, Resources, and U.S. Strategy [2],” Box 1, CCP, LBJPL.}

President Johnson and his other advisors felt the same shift on the home front, but the Washington doves still had a hard sell. It was not that Johnson was ignorant of the domestic context or the perilous situation in Vietnam. He understood that after Tet the public and Congress would not tolerate a sizeable increase in the number of American boys going to South Vietnam. Johnson asked aides,

\begin{quote}
How can we get this job done [in Vietnam]? We need more money—in an election year. We need more taxes—in an election year. We need more troops—in an election year. And we need cuts in the domestic budget—in an election year. And yet I cannot tell the people what they will get in Vietnam in return for these cuts. We have no support for the war.\footnote{LBJ quoted in Clifford, \textit{Counsel to the President}, 516.}
\end{quote}

Secretary of State Dean Rusk had supported LBJ’s tough stand on Vietnam, but he too sensed changed America’s mood, telling Johnson, “The nation can’t support a bottomless pit.”\footnote{Dean Rusk quoted in Clifford, \textit{Counsel to the President}, 516.} Rusk recalled, “The thing that concerned me was that this tumult in Congress and in the press continued to deprive Hanoi of any incentive to negotiate. The home front
collapse would give them politically what they could not get militarily.”¹⁵⁰ Both men recognized a change was necessary lest they lose all public support for the war. On March 5, Johnson told Rusk that he believed the administration was on the cusp of changing its strategy. Their previous forays into negotiating with Hanoi had yielded nothing but frustration, but Johnson was again moving toward diplomacy and now considering a bombing halt to save the domestic front.¹⁵¹

Johnson, Rusk, and the other administration hawks still wanted to save South Vietnam too. The Pentagon’s doves were up against not only LBJ’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 LBJ should carry on. The Joint Chiefs agreed and complained to Clifford that the United States had “not really gone out to win [the] war.” Now was the time to escalate, expanding the war into Laos and Cambodia and savagely bombing North Vietnam. Indeed, President Johnson wrestled with this question: was it time to press the advantage to decisive victory or did the domestic context dictate a change in strategy that could win the war at home and abroad?¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Dean Rusk quoted in Schandler, Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, 306.
¹⁵² Schmitz, The Tet Offensive, 137-138; and Notes of JCS Meeting, Clifford, 3/18/1968, #22, folder “Notes taken at Meetings [1],” Box 1, CCP, Box 1, LBJPL.
Clifford stepped in to tip the balance away from escalation and toward stabilizing the war. After March 4, Clifford made it his mission to mitigate the potential for further troop increases or escalation and convince President Johnson diplomacy was the better path. All the while, Warnke sought to provide Clifford with an alternate strategy that promised victory in Vietnam while eschewing greater violence in Indochina.

Amidst all this bureaucratic wrangling over Vietnam, Warnke’s memos marked the genesis of Vietnamization planning as he emphasized ARVN development instead of expanded bombing or increased American deployments. Rather than defeating Communist armies outright, American policymakers should adopt a strategy that would allow the United States to stay the course in Vietnam and prove that the South Vietnamese could not be defeated. Warnke advocated a strategy that held U.S. troops at their current level while engaging in pacification operations and improving the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese government and its forces. With MACV leaders focused almost exclusively on these goals, American diplomats should begin serious negotiations with Hanoi aimed at “mutual de-escalation.” Nowhere in March did he propose unilateral troop reductions, though. At times, Warnke even shared Rostow’s optimism. Warnke wrote, “The situation is far from stalemated. We are making steady, if painfully slow, progress.” With patience, the United States could preserve the Republic of Vietnam while negotiating its way out of a costly ground war, and Warnke urged Clifford to bring Johnson around to this conclusion.153

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153 Memo, Warnke to Clifford, 3/14/1968, #5, folder “Vietnam (1 Feb 68-15 Mar 68) [1],” Box 26, CCP, LBJPL; and memo, Warnke to Clifford, 3/18/1968, #3-3a, folder “Memos to Read [2],” Box 1, CCP, LBJPL.
Talking while fighting and building up the South Vietnamese as a substitute for American men proved to be a strategy to which all could agree. Because of perceived domestic constraints, U.S. policymakers tacitly acknowledged they could not continue sending increasing numbers of troops to South Vietnam. Hence, the South Vietnamese would have to provide the needed manpower. After Tet, Washington officials began placing real emphasis with significant planning on ARVN expansion, modernization, and improvement. And these discussions were not exclusive to the Pentagon doves. With President Johnson set to deliver a major address on Vietnam later that month, Rostow argued ARVN modernization and expansion should be its central theme. General Wheeler supported a policy similar to Warnke’s in that it capped the number of troops, focused on protecting the South Vietnamese population, and rapidly strengthened South Vietnamese forces but he believed the United States should simultaneously “beat up NVN from air and sea.” An unsigned memo to Clifford even argued that a successful pacification strategy could allow U.S. troop withdrawals in eighteen months, assuming the South Vietnamese government controlled three-quarters of the territory. Although the specifics varied, there was a growing administration consensus that they had reached the social and political limit on American troop contributions and that improved ARVN soldiers must fill the breach.154

Instead, negotiations and a cessation of the bombing over North Vietnam proved to be the controversial issue, and Clifford skillfully used the Wise Men to minimize the hawks’ remaining influence and convince Johnson to negotiate in sincerity. Sensing that

154 Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors*, 141; Notes of JCS Meeting, Clifford, 3/18/1968, #22, folder “Notes taken at Meetings [1],” Box 1, CCP, LBJPL; and memo, March 1968, #1b, folder “Memos to Read [2],” Box 1, CCP, LBJPL.
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. In this fateful March 26 meeting, pessimism replaced November’s 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 think we can.” It was not the military
situation in Vietnam that led them to recommend a different strategy, but the political
situation in the United States. Earlier in this gathering, 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.”155 Nonetheless, this meeting represented
America’s first real step towards stabilization as it further weakened the president’s
resolve, confirming his judgment that they had to change course in Vietnam. In short,
Clifford and the Wise Men helped push LBJ away from escalation and toward negotiations
and disengagement.156

One should note that disengagement did not mean support for unilateral
withdrawal. Rather, most of the Wise Men were against reductions 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.”157 Instead of withdrawal, disengagement meant

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155 LBJ, The Vantage Point, 418.
156 Schandler, Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, 255, 262; and Barrett, Lyndon B. Johnson’s Vietnam
Papers, 714-715.
halting the bombing campaign against North Vietnam in order to start negotiations and changing the ground strategy in South Vietnam so that America might continue the war with fewer casualties. Debates on the role of a bombing pause in negotiations, not troops, occupied the administration’s discussions.

Yet, these March discussions and developments represented a turning point. After Tet, it became clear to policymakers that the American public and Congress would not tolerate a large increase in the number of soldiers in Vietnam. The small number they approved would in fact become the cap on deployments there. Moreover, the Tet Offensive and domestic events in March had another effect on the White House as President Johnson decided not to seek reelection.

Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy (MN) never held out hope for electoral victory but he felt a moral obligation to run as the antiwar candidate in protest of 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. 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 youth to give up on the political process. His campaign would provide an outlet for anti-Johnson sentiment.

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158 Herring, America’s Longest War, 250.
Despite its small army of college-age volunteers, Senator McCarthy’s campaign gained little momentum until after the Tet Offensive.  

Tet intensified antiwar/anti-Johnson feelings, 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, *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 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 announcement,

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in combination with the McCarthy upset, played a large role in President Johnson’s decision not to run for reelection.\textsuperscript{160}

President Johnson’s March 31 address before the nation and the world marked the culmination of post-Tet developments. Johnson emphasized that his administration was taking the first step towards de-escalation by implementing a partial bombing halt over North Vietnam. He made clear that the United States had “no intention of widening the war” and hoped that the halt would serve as proof to Hanoi as well as domestic and international opinion that America was serious about ending the war diplomatically. LBJ stood firm on the negotiated mutual withdrawal of foreign forces in South Vietnam, though. The President explained how the South Vietnamese were doing their part to rapidly expand and improve their armed forces, and that the United States was taking measures to accelerate these efforts as they would “enable them to undertake a larger share of combat operations against the Communist invaders.” That said, Johnson noted that he would continue deploying American soldiers up to the newly authorized level in order to counter the Tet offensive. President Johnson then concluded with the revelation that he would neither seek nor accept his party’s nomination for president.\textsuperscript{161}

Johnson’s March 31 speech represented a clear victory for the doves. Tet created a rare moment where, as one historian aptly put it, the “hawks [were] outnumbered and on the defensive.” After Tet, Secretaries Rusk and Clifford both moved in favor of

\textsuperscript{160}LaFeber, \textit{The Deadly Bet}, 43-45, 47; Perlstein, \textit{Nixonland}, 232; and Powers, \textit{The War at Home}, 291.

negotiations with the latter decisive in shifting the address away from endurance for military victory to one of gradual de-escalation, beginning with a partial bombing halt. The administration also reached a tentative consensus on a troop ceiling, but a formal policy remained nonexistent. The White House had decided to level off its commitment, nothing more. Americans expected the South Vietnamese to do more and provide the men America could not. President Johnson moved toward negotiations but he remained bent on preserving South Vietnam and so retained the flexibility to resume or expand the bombing or number of troops if he deemed necessary. The doves had won the first round, but like so many Vietnam battles, victory proved fleeting.\textsuperscript{162}

\textbf{April-August, De-Americanization vs. Escalation}

Tet only temporarily stunned the hawks. Clifford remained a devoted dove but his standing with the president waned thereafter as Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow, Maxwell Taylor, and other hawks attacked his suggestions that Johnson embrace negotiations and de-escalate the war. The White House became a battleground of words and memos as both sides competed for presidential approval. Hence, as Vietnam historian George Herring rightly argued, LBJ and his advisors “fought bitterly over the war” for the remainder of his term and Johnson refused to commit to either escalation or de-escalation.\textsuperscript{163}

These divisions were particularly acute from April through August as the administration battled over negotiations and resumed air strikes. During this period, Clifford’s team at the Pentagon began the actual policy planning that would outline and


\textsuperscript{163} Acacia, \textit{Clark Clifford}, 300; and Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, 48-49.
allocate resources for South Vietnamese mobilization and modernization along with the initial plans for U.S. withdrawals after a settlement. Meanwhile, Clifford urged President Johnson to pursue peace talks and not to listen to those advisors and military leaders advocating a resumption and perhaps expansion of the bombardment of North Vietnam. De-escalation and negotiations competed with Johnson’s desire for victory. A year later, Nixon’s White House would suffer the same divisions and predilections. Nevertheless, Clifford’s planning facilitated the Nixon administration’s Vietnamization program.

Clark Clifford sought to build on March’s stabilization of the war by capping the number of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam and pressing the South Vietnamese to assume a larger proportion of the fighting. At an April 11 news conference, Clifford took the administration’s cautious agreement on troop numbers and unilaterally made 549,500 men the official troop ceiling. He then suggested that improved ARVN units could eventually move in to replace U.S. forces in certain areas with the Americans possibly “drawn back in reserve.” Addressing the Associated Press on April 22, Clifford expanded on this theme, declaring, “Americans will not need always to do more and more, but rather that the increased effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Government and its fighting forces will now permit us to level off our effort—and in due time to begin the gradual process of reduction.” Clifford hoped these public statements would reassure the American people while laying the groundwork for a policy that could allow for U.S disengagement should negotiations break down. But Clifford was working independently of the President. Rostow noted to LBJ, “As you can see, Clark has eased over from your concept of a ‘larger share’ for the Vietnamese to the idea that ‘we level off.’” Nevertheless, the ceiling remained in place. With the U.S. commitment effectively capped, manpower would have
to come from somewhere else, and Clifford’s strong words pointed that responsibility toward the South Vietnamese.¹⁶⁴

Bureaucracies move on memos, not rhetoric, and so in mid-April, Clifford and his team at the Pentagon began requesting and developing plans to modernize, expand, and improve the Republic of Vietnam’s military with a view toward reducing the American role. General Westmoreland had initiated a plan to gradually modernize and enlarge the South Vietnamese military in 1967, but the Tet Offensive catalyzed this process. This planning assumed no unilateral U.S. reductions or at the most, very limited redeployments, though.

At Clifford’s behest, MACV officials drew up the first plan. Predicated on an impending mutual withdrawal of foreign forces, the objective was to increase and modernize the South Vietnamese army over five years to deal with the insurgency alone. This May Plan, named after the month of its creation, assumed North Vietnamese and allied soldiers would withdraw according to a negotiated settlement, something they anticipated could occur as early as July 1. They hoped scheduled deliveries of modern arms like the M16 rifle and expansion of the Republic army up to 800,000 fighting men would make South Vietnam fully capable of dealing with the NLF insurgency without the aid of U.S. ground troops by 1973. Yet, they proposed an ongoing residual force of approximately twenty thousand American personnel with most belonging to the Air Force. Johnson’s

¹⁶⁴ Memo, Rostow to LBJ, 4/29/1968, #1g, folder “Meetings with the President, January-April, 1968 [1],” Box 1, Rostow, NSF, LBJPL; Acacia, Clark Clifford, 286-287; and Clifford, Counsel to the President, 535.
South Vietnamese improvement program evolved from the May Plan but remained predicated on mutual withdrawal.\textsuperscript{165}

Drawing on the May Plan, Washington policymakers began making formal plans to build up the South Vietnamese military as rapidly as possible. General Wheeler noted they should expedite modernization and expansion while continuing to support the goal of ARVN self-sufficiency against the NLF, not the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Time was of the essence as negotiations could produce a settlement that capped American military aid to the Republic of Vietnam. To achieve South Vietnamese self-defense, there would be three phases: the first, providing modern arms and equipment, the second enlarging their army up to 800,000 men, and finally ending with preparations for the mutual withdrawal of all foreign forces, including the North Vietnamese. In June, Cold War strategist Paul Nitze formalized these plans and reduced the improvement schedule to two phases. The first provided for “the maximum possible GVN ground combat capability” and assumed American participation at current levels. Phase II would then prepare the South Vietnamese to handle the insurgency alone and expected mutual U.S./NVA withdrawal. Nitze’s improvement and expansion planning became the model for U.S. efforts, but building up the South Vietnamese did not correspond with diminishing the American presence in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{166}

Indeed, the Johnson administration never seriously considered or planned for unilateral withdrawal. Neither Nitze nor the JCS contemplated anything beyond a token reduction in American forces. Nitze even fretted over a scheduled redeployment of a HAWK surface-to-air missile battalion, worrying it might reduce the overall troop numbers temporarily and give the appearance of a reduction. Similarly, Clifford agreed with his British counterpart that the United States could not cut its forces in Vietnam lest it weaken its negotiating position in Paris. Moreover, actual planning for any U.S. reduction did not even begin until the last half of 1968. But once again, policymakers based this planning on the North Vietnamese army’s simultaneous departure. American withdrawal and increasing South Vietnamese responsibility remained on separate tracks.\(^{167}\)

As in March, Warnke was the voice in the wilderness. Warnke argued that ARVN improvements had enabled the U.S. troop ceiling and might permit eventual American withdrawals, perhaps beginning later that year. Whereas troop increases would have incited violent unrest at home, the prospect of reductions would elicit public enthusiasm. Continuing negotiations would also shore up domestic and international support. Besides, disengagement did not signify abandonment of America’s objective in Vietnam. Warnke wrote, “If a military solution is inevitable, we can win only by making the South Vietnamese forces capable, as rapidly as possible, of ensuring their own security and freedom. This is the only ‘military victory’ remotely achievable.” Bombing would neither compel Hanoi to negotiate nor stop its aggression against South Vietnam, but strengthening

\(^{167}\) Memorandum for the Record, Nitze, 7/17/1968, \textit{FRUS}, 1964-1968, 6:874; Memo, Nitze to Wheeler, 7/10/1968, #130, folder “Vietnam (10 July-29 August 68) [4],” Box 26, CCP, LBJPL; and “Notes on the Meeting Held with Mr. Clark Clifford in Brussels on Friday, 10th May at 0730,” DEFE 24/668, PRO.
the Vietnamese while withdrawing troops could solve domestic problems without conceding the battlefield advantage. A subsequent memo suggested the United States test ARVN readiness by redeploying Americans soldiers to a base camp while substituting South Vietnamese forces. Should the military situation hold, then policymakers could withdraw the redeployed troops from South Vietnam. Here was a blueprint for Vietnamization. But Warnke was selling a good almost nobody was buying.¹⁶⁸

Due to Warnke’s influence and Clifford’s sincere desire to “get out” of Vietnam “without it [being] a sheer debacle,” Clifford concluded in July that Warnke’s proposition had merit. He urged the President to “equip, train and man the RVNAF as priority items so that U.S. forces may be gradually withdrawn from Vietnam.” MACV commander General Creighton Abrams, who had replaced Westmoreland in June, concurred. Abrams argued they could begin transitioning to a greater South Vietnamese role in the next three months. Indeed, Abrams and Clifford gave improving the South Vietnamese military the “highest priority” with a view toward “gradually reducing the US role in the war,” though they lacked formal plans or authority to do so. Thus, the path toward Vietnamization lay before them but so was its nemesis—renewed and extended bombing.¹⁶⁹

Clifford and Warnke were administration outsiders on constant defense to prevent a full return to or even expanded bombing of North Vietnam. The temptation to unleash a


¹⁶⁹ Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 5/18/1968, #9, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; memorandum, Clifford to LBJ, 7/18/1968, FRUS, 1964-1968, 6:875-882; Memo, Clifford, 8/7/1968, #14a, folder “RVNAF Development and Modernization [1],” Box 24, CCP, LBJPL; and memo, Richard Steadman, 8/26/1968, #10, folder “RVNAF Development and Modernization [1],” Box 24, CCP, LBJPL.
massive air and sea campaign against North Vietnam to compel them to settle the war was not exclusive to Richard Nixon and his administration. After his March 31 speech and partial bombing halt, Johnson continued to consider launching renewed attacks against Hanoi. Rather than focusing on a program of Vietnamization, Clifford had to direct his attention and stamina toward keeping the President focused on negotiations and away from coercive diplomacy.

Again, Warnke was the dovish analyst supporting Clifford’s position. Warnke sent Clifford a constant stream of memos lambasting the effectiveness of airpower. Warnke urged him to resist internal pressures to bomb North Vietnam even if Hanoi upped the war in the South. Bombing would only destroy the negotiations with little military gain. Warnke forwarded CIA and other memos that argued Hanoi would remain inflexible and continue the fighting in spite of any bombing. The CIA found it best to postpone any resumption as battlefield success in South Vietnam and an improved U.S. domestic position would put as much pressure on Hanoi to settle as any air assault. At home, Warnke argued congressional hawks had muted their calls for increased bombing and at present there were no demands for any resumption. In short, a massive assault using U.S. airpower would only distract policymakers from the more important ground war in South Vietnam and threaten violent unrest at home.\textsuperscript{170}

\textsuperscript{170} Memo, Warnke to Clifford, 4/22/1968, #4, folder “Notes taken at Meetings [1].” Box 1, CCP, LBJPL; notes, Clifford, 5/25/1968, #6, folder “Notes taken at Meetings [1],” Box 1, CCP, LBJPL; memo, Warnke to Clifford, 5/28/1968, #1, folder “Southeast Asia: Material on Bombing, May 1968,” Box 3, CCP, LBJPL; and Memo, c.5/28/1968, #3, folder “Southeast Asia: Material on Bombing, May 1968,” Box 3, CCP, LBJPL.
Clifford agreed with and at times dramatized Warnke’s assessments—America had to extricate itself from Vietnam and it was imperative negotiations continue. From May on, Clifford constantly reminded his staff, “We’ve got to find a way to get out!” Clifford believed that preserving the Republic of Vietnam was not essential to U.S. interests or credibility. Clifford was also hopeful that negotiations could produce an acceptable settlement, telling staff, “If we don’t want too much, we might get out of the war in 68.” Moreover, Clifford was adamant that there would be “hell here at home among the people” if talks broke down. For both foreign and domestic reasons, Washington had to find a way out of Vietnam, and Clifford saw it as his responsibility to convince President Johnson of this fact.\footnote{Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 5/18/1968, #9, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 5/29/1968, #15, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; and Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 6/11/1968, #23, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, Box 1, LBJPL (emphasis in original).}

Yet, Warnke and Clifford faced LBJ’s desire for victory and the Joint Chief’s penchant for unrestricted warfare against America’s foes in Vietnam. When Clifford warned LBJ that military victory was impossible and that renewed bombing could destroy the Paris negotiations, Johnson retorted, “Why is that so bad?...[We] can’t win—because of limitation.” Johnson subsequently demanded Clifford solicit the Joint Chiefs for plans for renewed aggression should the “Paris talks stall or break down.”\footnote{Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 5/22/1968, #11, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; and memo, Clifford to Wheeler, 5/24/1968, #7, folder “Memos on Vietnam, April-May 1968,” Box 3, CCP, LBJPL.}

The Joint Chiefs and its chairman, Earle Wheeler, eagerly answered the president’s call. Echoing LBJ’s frustration, Wheeler responded that policymakers should let the military bomb North Vietnam without restrictions. Wheeler argued, “The military actions
which are required to create favorable conditions for satisfactory negotiations are very nearly identical with those military actions which should be taken if the talks are broken off.” These actions would “either render the enemy incapable of continuing the war or cause him to recognize the inevitable destruction of his capability to continue the war.” Thus, they favored a savage bombing campaign that would strike every target of military value in Hanoi and Haiphong. They even considered moving U.S. and South Vietnamese troops into the demilitarized zone (DMZ). “Forceful action,” not the incrementalism of prior years, would force Hanoi to capitulate under an unprecedented air and naval campaign. The Joint Chiefs believed that Americans would accept this escalation if administration officials tied the partial bombing halt to “unnecessary [U.S.] casualties.” Untrammeled American airpower could win the war or at least force a settlement; President Johnson need only say the word.173

Communist shelling and terrorist attacks on South Vietnamese cities provided the flashpoint that very nearly tipped the balance toward resuming intensive bombing of North Vietnam. In May and June, these attacks destroyed twenty thousand homes and killed nearly six hundred civilians in Saigon alone.174 Warnke and Clifford did not see these attacks as proof that Hanoi was taking advantage of the bombing halt. They argued the bombing halt understanding only prohibited North Vietnam from launching artillery fire from their territory, massing troops in the DMZ, and greatly increasing their infiltration

174 Minutes, R. Eugene Livesay, 7/1/1968, #33, folder “Minutes of SoD Staff Meetings, March-September,” Box 18, CCP, LBJPL.
south. Rusk, Rostow, and the American ambassador in Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, all disagreed and favored renewed bombing if the violence against Saigon continued. The cacophonous hawks again very nearly drowned out the doves. President Johnson was frank with Clifford, telling the Secretary of Defense in late June that he was at the end of “his rope and was going to serve an ultimatum on NVN, ‘If you don’t stop hitting Saigon, we’ll attack Hanoi!’” Yet, Johnson wavered. He chose to continue fighting while negotiating and opted to escalate the air and ground wars in South Vietnam rather than upset the fragile domestic balance by bombing North Vietnam. Clifford’s inability to move the president toward de-escalation and conciliatory talks confirmed his outsider status, though.175

Clifford’s despair gives a sense of his isolation from the White House and the unlikeliness of any Vietnamization program during the Johnson administration. Those around Clifford described him as “moody” and “deeply troubled by finding himself alone.” By early August, President Johnson was registering his displeasure of his subordinate’s views. After enduring another lecture on how America had fulfilled its commitment to South Vietnam and that it was time to settle the war with or without its ally, LBJ responded curtly, “Clark, it’s very interesting, but I don’t agree with a word that you have said.” Johnson did not mince words regarding suspected doves either, telling Clifford “those in the Pentagon, among [Clifford’s] civilians, the [Alain] Enthovens and that group [at

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175 Memo, Warnke to Clifford, 6/4/1968, #6, folder “Southeast Asia: Memoranda,” Box 3, CCP, LBJPL; memo, Clifford, 7/21/1968, #1, folder “Warnke Notebook on Vietnam, 1968 [1],” Box 9, Warnke Files, LBJPL; Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 6/11/1968 (#23) and 6/24/68 (#33), folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; and Herring, America’s Longest War, 255-257.
systems analysis], and a bunch over in State too, I just believe they’re unsound.” As Clifford biographer John Acacia put it, “Clifford was very much alone.”

Clifford believed Johnson and his closest advisors were bent on preserving South Vietnam and wanted “a smashing military victory.” Clifford was growing increasingly frustrated with hawks like Secretary of State Dean Rusk whose mindset was to “hit ‘em again and again!” This frustration clouded his judgment as he concluded that Hanoi was ready to settle whereas Saigon was unwilling to do its share of the fighting or negotiate a peace. Throughout the last days of the Johnson administration, Clifford grew more bitter as he found himself increasingly marginalized by the White House and as the war dragged on. Running a constant offense to keep LBJ from resuming full-scale air campaigns against North Vietnam, Clifford lacked the time and energy to develop, much less advocate, a policy of unilateral withdrawals based on Vietnamese strength. Clifford helped kick start the first serious plans for rapid ARVN improvement but U.S. reductions remained in the world of talk and conjecture. Of course, there was never an audience for such a de-escalatory policy anyway.

Nevertheless, the Johnson administration laid a crude foundation for Richard Nixon’s future policies. President Johnson had taken two steps toward de-escalation: opening the Paris peace talks and leveling off the war effort. But LBJ constantly threatened to take one step back. Johnson kept resumed and escalated bombing plans on the table and

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176 Notes of Meetings, George Elsey, 6/11/1968 (#23), 6/24/1968, (#33), and 7/22/1968, (#49), folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1].” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; Clifford, Counsel to the President, 368, 571; and telephone conversation between LBJ and Clifford, 9/2/1968, FRUS, 1964-1968, 7:2; and Acacia, Clark Clifford, 283.

177 Notes of Meetings, George Elsey, 6/11/1968 (#23), 6/24/1968, (#33), and 7/22/1968, (#49), folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1].” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL.
refused to consider any reduction of U.S. forces in South Vietnam. Johnson retained the flexibility necessary to pursue a different, more militant course, one that might still nail the coonskin to the wall. Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Melvin Laird inherited LBJ’s commitments, policies, and promises as well as 1968’s bureaucratic developments, though. Nixon and Kissinger felt constrained by Johnson’s bombing halt pledge and both shared LBJ’s predilection for dramatic air and naval campaigns against Hanoi. On the other hand, Laird embraced and reformulated Warnke’s memos on ARVN improvement and disengagement, turning these plans into a legitimate Vietnamization policy even as he, like Clifford, faced resistance from his superior. But in early 1968, these machinations belonged to an uncertain future as Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger each reacted to White House announcements in the context of the 1968 presidential race. Vietnam would again serve as their device of choice for political advancement.
3. Winning the Election & the War:

The Republicans & De-Americanization, January-August 1968

As America’s Vietnam policy evolved behind the scenes and public unrest occupied the headlines, the electoral battle for the presidency 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. The presidential election placed America at a crossroads with the victor determining its path in Vietnam.

For the first half of 1968, Republicans struggled to find a Vietnam policy capable of uniting the party and winning the presidential election. 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 avoided specific pronouncements on how they would end the war.178

Despite these early difficulties, by the start of the Republican National Convention in August, the GOP had come together on a strategy of de-Americanizing—gradually removing U.S. units as South Vietnamese forces assumed the conflict’s burden—the Vietnam War. After the Tet Offensive, Richard Nixon realized American support for continued escalation of the war was faltering. To win his party’s nomination and ultimately

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the general election, Nixon emphasized South Vietnamese responsibility and, belatedly, gradual U.S. withdrawal, but his focus shifted towards law and order at home rather than Vietnam. Though not a candidate, Melvin Laird remained one of the party’s most influential leaders. Due to partisan interest and fears of growing domestic unrest, Laird embraced and championed de-Americanization well ahead of other Republicans. Finally, Nelson Rockefeller and his advisor Henry Kissinger moved towards a specific de-escalation and negotiations strategy to advance Rockefeller’s nomination or at least influence the Republican plank. As the convention opened in Miami, the party’s major players—Nixon, Laird, and Rockefeller—had each independently adopted de-Americanization. Their path towards this uncertain conclusion reveals not only the connection between Vietnam and Republican politics but the rhetorical antecedents of Vietnamization.

**Richard Nixon: Everything Old is New Again**

Though defeated in 1960, Richard Nixon never abandoned his quest for the White House. Foreign policy, particularly Vietnam, provided his springboard back into politics. He constantly attacked Democrats for not doing more to win in Indochina—both by building up local forces and bombing Communists into submission. Yet, this formula did not guarantee political success in 1968. After Tet, frustration with the war returned with a growing proportion of the public calling for negotiations and moderation rather than more escalation. As one Nixon speechwriter noted, Vietnam was full of “sticky crosscurrents” that could drown the otherwise indefatigable candidate.\(^{179}\) Nixon needed a Vietnam

\(^{179}\) Whalen, *Catch the Falling Flag*, 169.
position to win the nomination and then the general election but he sought to woo doves while keeping the hawks’ support by being as vague as possible. In his basic campaign speech, he bemoaned America’s moral and strategic decay while emphasizing the need for new leadership. Recalling his bitter defeat to a younger, suave John F. Kennedy, Nixon also adopted a TV-centered strategy. Gone was the cross-country barnstorming that left him haggard and exhausted in 1960. Staged television appearances and sound bites took on greater importance than developing substantive positions as Nixon focused on looking good and avoiding tough questions and gaffes. This superficial campaign style should not imply that Nixon stopped developing his Vietnam policies. In 1968, de-Americanization became his stated prescription for the morass overseas.\footnote{Ambrose, \textit{Nixon, Volume II}, 137-139; Perlstein, \textit{Nixonland}, 135, 252, 329, 332; Johns, \textit{Vietnam’s Second Front}, 191, 196; see also RN, \textit{Six Crises}, 422.}

Before the Tet Offensive registered with American opinion, Nixon maintained his past positions on Vietnam and U.S. foreign policy. He told the Women’s National Republican Club on January 27 that Free World forces needed to do more to counter the global Communist threat but acknowledged a more circumscribed role for America. Nixon stated, “We will help with our arms, we will help with our money, but it should be our objective to help them fight the enemy rather than for the United States to fight the war for them.” Nixon argued that no one understood this strategy better than President Dwight Eisenhower and he portrayed the Ike years as a golden age of peace, tranquility, and prosperity with Free World forces and alliances riding high. Nixon promised Republican voters that he could lead America back to this Promised Land. As for Vietnam, Nixon lambasted the Johnson administration for its mid-January bombing pause, which LBJ
briefly implemented to encourage peace talks. Tet was proof of Communist perfidy. Only by “prosecut[ing] the war more effectively” could the United States compel Hanoi to negotiate. Consistent with his campaign strategy, RN did not elaborate on how policymakers should prosecute the war, but one can be sure that he did not mean de-escalation.\(^{181}\)

As with President Johnson, the public’s reaction to Tet changed Nixon’s political calculus on the Vietnam War; henceforth, South Vietnamese training and expansion, rather than increased bombing, received top billing. Foreign policy speechwriter Richard Whalen wrote to Nixon in early February, arguing that it would be politically and strategically correct “to rule out any widening of the war and any further American commitment” and “proclaim the intention to ‘de-escalate’ the level of American commitment and effort so as to free our resources to meet more important and immediate challenges. This is not retreat; this is sanity.” Nixon agreed with this assessment and increasingly backed a diplomatic solution with Soviet mediation to pressure Hanoi into a settlement. Yet, he refused to accept any bombing pause or U.S. withdrawals much less a coalition government. Nixon publicly swore his administration would be as committed to South Vietnam as Johnson’s but even he admitted, “I’m not trying to be coy or political….It’s vital to get out in an honorable way.”\(^{182}\) Nixon realized placing the onus on the South Vietnamese gave him the chance to attack President Johnson’s gradualism without trumpeting the need to escalate the American war in Indochina. And it worked. In February, RN tested his line


about developing ARVN forces, and audiences loved it. Nixon had been emphasizing indigenous training and defense for fifteen years, but in the tumultuous days after the Tet Offensive began, even that which was old could appear novel.  

By March, Nixon was unequivocal on the need to train and build up the South Vietnamese military. In a Q/A session before students at Washington and Lee University, Nixon lambasted Johnson for having “wasted our air and sea and land power in the conduct of that war.” LBJ had ignored Korea’s lesson on the danger of American land wars in Asia by “failing to train until very recently on an adequate basis the South Vietnamese so that they could take over the major share of protecting their country against guerillas.” 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. Nixon was not proposing a unilateral U.S. exit but a systematic effort to build up ARVN forces while marshaling America’s non-military resources to “end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.”

Richard Nixon’s longtime Republican colleague and informal advisor Wisconsin Representative Melvin Laird urged the candidate to go further by turning South Vietnamese improvement into a de-Americanization plan. Though Laird thought Nelson

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183 Memo, Whalen to RN, 2/3/1968, PPS 208:102:21, RNLBF; and Whalen, Catch the Falling Flag, 82-83, 98, 128.
184 RN, Interview for WKBK radio, 3/3, 1968, folder “Nixon-Statements before the Presidency,” Box 21, Baroody Papers, GFL.
Rockefeller was the more electable candidate, he recognized that Nixon would win the nomination and so quietly reached out to the likely nominee. Laird worried Nixon’s pledge to “end the war” would prove impossible in his first term. Nixon should instead promise to “end American participation in the war” by withdrawing U.S. soldiers as ARVN forces take over the fighting. It was no coincidence then that speaking before a crowd in Laird’s hometown on March 14, Nixon asserted America should aid the South Vietnamese but “not fight [the war] for them.” Nixon continued, “If they do not assume the majority of the burden in their own defense, they cannot be saved.” After Nixon won the April 2 Wisconsin primary, Laird publicly endorsed and supported Nixon while pushing him to make a formal pledge at the Republican Convention to de-Americanize the Vietnam War. In the interim, Nixon temporized by supporting ARVN improvement and expansion without coupling it to U.S. redeployments. For both Laird and Nixon, success in Vietnam had to begin with South Vietnamese self-defense, though.\footnote{“Laird Expects Nixon to Win Nomination,” \textit{New York Times}, 1/5/1968, p. 22; Rowland Evans Jr. and Robert D. Novak, \textit{Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power} (New York: Random House, 1971), 76-77; “Nixon Urges Rise in Allied Soldiers,” \textit{New York Times}, 3/15/1968, p. 26 (italics added); Van Atta, \textit{With Honor}, 126-128.}

Nixon extrapolated this popular self-help philosophy to America’s global commitments. He condemned Johnson for not giving the Vietnamese the resources to resist Communism on their own. Instead, LBJ’s Americanization allowed the South Vietnamese to grow lax and depend upon U.S. forces to defend their nation. Echoing his and President Eisenhower’s fifties rhetoric, Nixon noted his administration would not make the same mistake but in the future, help allied forces “fight the war for themselves, rather than fighting the war for them.” Nixon continued, “Nations in the path of potential
aggression must prepare to take their own measures, both individually and collectively, to contain the aggressor….This is not a retreat from responsibility, and not a new isolationism.” In a March 28 radio address, Nixon repeated this theme. Using the topic to attack both LBJ’s foreign and domestic policies, he argued that “welfarism” bred dependence on government largesse. At home, Great Society policies had embittered the nation and encouraged urban unrest. Abroad, this same philosophy had stretched America’s strategic resources to their limit, and rather than strengthening and emboldening America’s allies, its friends had grown complacent, happily allowing the United States to assume their defense burden. In short, Nixon concluded, “If the other nations of the free world want to remain free, then they must rise in their own defense. They can no longer afford the luxury of relying on American power.” Self-reliance was the essential virtue at home and abroad, especially in Vietnam. Nixon was playing to the values of the silent “consensus” of hardworking Americans, promising that others could and would do more to improve themselves and international security. Though born out of Nixon’s longstanding convictions, it proved great campaign rhetoric as well as the intellectual antecedents for the 1969 Nixon Doctrine and Vietnamization. But Nixon was admittedly drawing on the past as he called for a return to “Eisenhower diplomacy”—using strong allies as proxies while threatening to unleash American firepower on its recalcitrant enemies.187

Indeed, despite Nixon’s post-Tet emphasis on diplomacy and South Vietnamese self-defense, his penchant for coercive power remained. He again harkened back to Ike’s legacy. As Nixon remembered it, the Communists did not begin substantive peace talks on the Korean War until Eisenhower’s administration intimated “that Ike would take stronger means” unless they got serious. RN summarized, “What got them off dead center was the word that we would walk softly and carry a big stick.” As Nixon told listeners in a March radio interview, the same held true in Vietnam; Hanoi must negotiate or face military reprisal. Nixon laid it on the line. The president “should make very clear to the enemy that we are not going to tolerate this war going on and on….If the enemy…does not go along with a program of live-and-let-live, then we have to have the option to move with more military power.” Nixon’s rhetoric along with LBJ’s ongoing struggle over policy makes clear that whether in Johnson’s White House or on the campaign trail, America’s tentative steps toward de-escalation and withdrawal always competed with renewed and expanded violence in Vietnam. In both instances, their reading of the political tea leaves would determine their course.188

Accordingly, Nixon and his speechwriters sensed the changing mood in Washington as well as the nation. Even without knowing the entirety of Clifford’s influence on the Johnson administration, Nixon feared Robert F. Kennedy’s candidacy would force LBJ to choose between continuing the war or withdrawing U.S. troops and accepting a phony peace to win reelection. With America and its president faltering, Nixon concluded on March 29 that the war had become unwinnable—the domestic front had made

for an almost impossible situation in Vietnam. Before Tet, Nixon remained hopeful that American airpower could compel Hanoi’s surrender but now he doubted the public would stand for these measures or a prolonged war. Nixon ruminated to journalist Theodore White, “It was important that we get out, but that we not be defeated. How do you liquidate that war with honor?” Nixon may have lacked the answer but in late March he and his speechwriters began preparing a series of speeches to explain how America could preserve noncommunist South Vietnam and get out with honor.\textsuperscript{189}

These drafts reflected Nixon’s political strategy and Vietnam position before LBJ’s surprise announcement not to run for reelection. As speechwriter Richard Whalen noted, their aim was “to find the least assailable middle ground.” They emphasized the need for détente with the Soviet Union and China and hoped to enlist their diplomatic support in ending the war on terms acceptable to U.S. and RVN interests. To improve the allied position on the battlefield, Nixon advocated a “clear and hold” strategy that would protect the South Vietnamese populace and gradually expand Republic control even as they assumed the burden of defense. As president, Nixon would “increase the threat of, and the fact of, air and sea pressure” to bring Hanoi to the bargaining table. Nowhere did Nixon promise to de-escalate the war or begin withdrawing U.S. troops. Nixon had committed himself to preserving South Vietnam and winning the election. These speeches, with Nixon scheduled to deliver the first on March 31, would be his attempt to lay out a

politically tenable position that would not compromise the Republic of Vietnam, but events rescued Nixon from having to be even this specific.\textsuperscript{190}

When President Johnson announced he too would give a March 31 speech, Nixon canceled his own, shrewdly postponing any statement until after hearing the incumbent speak. When LBJ bowed out of the race, apparently choosing the prospect of peace over political ambition, Nixon also claimed to put peace over politics. Nixon scrapped the aforementioned speeches and announced on April 1 that he would not make a comprehensive statement on Vietnam lest he complicate the negotiations. Henceforth, Nixon would promise “an honorable end to the war in Vietnam” but refuse to make any specific pronouncement until after the election, inspiring the popular myth that he had a secret plan to end the war. Freed from the political liability of Vietnam, Nixon returned to his stratagem of silence and flexibility on Vietnam while focusing on another of his old themes—law and order.\textsuperscript{191}

Nixon had long appealed to the mass of Americans by attacking radical minorities. In 1965, he reached out to the silent “consensus” of patriotic Americans who stood by America’s commitment to Vietnam (as opposed to those nefarious antiwar students and professors). In 1967, he attacked the lawless counterculture degrading America’s values as well as those who protested the war in Vietnam. Even in early 1968, Nixon painted a stark picture. Nixon told radio listeners, “The problem of order” was the number one


\textsuperscript{191} Statement, RN, 4/1/1968, PPS 208:94:18, RNLBF; Johns, \textit{Vietnam’s Second Front}, 199, 202; and on RN’s pledge to honorably end to the war, see the ad at http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1968/vietnam (accessed 8/10/2013).
election issue as “millions of Americans are asking whether their country can survive, and whether their world will survive. Both abroad and at home, the forces of destruction threaten our lives and our institutions.”

Certainly a large number of Americans had been watching domestic events with ever-growing angst. The August 1965 Los Angeles Watts riot marked the sixties descent into violence and political polarization. The combination of African American frustration and police violence sparked four days of destruction that only ended with the National Guard’s deployment, but most white, middle-class Americans saw only the trampling of law, decency, and order. They saw the same at universities where the counterculture and protest movements flouted traditional values. And things only grew worse. Though very small in number, radical blacks and whites increasingly embraced the use of violence to achieve political ends. Quiet Americans feared the worst and the supposed experts agreed. Richard Sanger, author of Insurgent Era, wrote in a December 1967 issue of U.S. News & World Report that “insurrection and open revolt” could be brewing in America. He predicted demonstrations and riots would grow increasingly radical and violent with the discontented concluding “the only answer is: ‘Burn, baby, burn!’” Even the Johnson administration, especially Clark Clifford’s advisors busy formulating Vietnam strategy behind closed doors, calculated the grave threat to domestic stability outweighed any conceivable benefit of escalating the war.

192 RN, NBC Radio Network Address, 3/7/1968, PPS 208:94:13, RNLBF.
His political instincts in tune with these forgotten Americans, Nixon swore off Vietnam as a topic and made law and order the campaign’s focus. Immediately after LBJ’s March 31 announcement, Nixon wrote to conservative Pat Buchanan instructing him to prepare a major speech on crime and “the idea of the rule of law.” Nixon would take his stand with the law-abiding citizens, contrasting them (and himself) with those liberals who stood by or even condoned the riots, protests, and wanton lawlessness. The difference between 1968 and Nixon’s past appeals was that in that tumultuous year, events moved with the campaign’s new direction.

Mere days from Johnson’s speech, unparalleled riots wracked the nation after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination on April 4. Even before King’s death, individuals within the black rights movement were abandoning nonviolent methods as peaceful demonstrations often turned bloody. King’s death unleashed a new wave of unrest, 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 Washington 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. Historian Jeremi Suri wrote,

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 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.

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194 Letter, RN to Pat Buchanan on Crime and Law and Order, PPS 500:26:3, RNLBF.
With the White House in the background, an anonymous black teen told a reporter that King had “compromised his life away…If I’m nonviolent, I’ll die. If I’m violent, I’ll still die, but I’ll take a honky with me.” Hostile actions and rhetoric unnerved policymakers. Observing the chaos and carnage outside, Secretary of Defense Clifford believed, “The sickness is there and deep,” and he noted how critical it was that federal forces were ready to deal with this domestic threat to national security. 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.

Outbreaks of campus unrest became a recurring event in 1968. Antiwar and antiestablishment causes ran together as students conducted what sometimes became 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 militants nationwide, students at Columbia occupied several buildings on campus for seven days, destroying and defacing university property. The tension between students and the administration had been building for years but the focal point became university construction of a gym on a plot annexed from public parkland in Harlem. Columbia’s president, Grayson Kirk, could see the approaching storm. On April 12, he stated, “Our young people, in disturbing numbers appear to reject all forms of authority, from whatever source derived, and they have taken refuge in a

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195 Minutes, R. Eugene Livesay, 4/8/1968, #10, folder “Minutes of SoD Staff Meetings, March-September,” Box 18, CCP, LBJPL.
turbulent inchoate nihilism whose sole objectives are destruction.” Mark Rudd, who was leading the younger, more radical “action faction” of the campus Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was looking for a fight with the university administration. He offered this rejoinder to the president on April 22,

Grayson, I doubt if you will understand any of this…you call for order and respect for authority; we call for justice, freedom, and socialism. There is only one thing left to say. It may sound nihilistic to you, since it is the opening shot in a war of liberation. I’ll use the words of LeRoi Jones, whom I’m sure you don’t like a whole lot: “Up against the wall, motherfucker, this is a stick-up.”

The following day, a protest of the annexation and gym project turned into an unplanned occupation of campus buildings as rhetoric and violence rapidly escalated. This apparent attack on order, decency, and higher education ended only after black students left peacefully, allowing the administration and police to remove the remaining students without fear of repercussions from Harlem. The brutality displayed by New York police officers as they cleared the buildings of protesters only incensed and radicalized more students. Although only a vocal minority of college students engaged in these protests, it appeared to many Americans as well as Washington officials as if America’s youth had declared war on the establishment.197

Many policymakers and politicians agreed with the U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, who on an April visit home commented, “It’s just like Vietnam.” Richard Whalen recognized the emerging, dangerous chasm between the radical minority and fearful majority as “panic-stricken white suburbanites” were giving in to their own primal instinct “to stand and fight.” In a memo to his candidate, Whalen

197 Small, Antiwarriors, 87-88; and Charles Kaiser, 1968 in America, 150, 155-165.
lamented, “Up to now, we have spoken of our cities as ‘jungles’ as though using a figure of speech. Things were bad, but not that bad. Well, the word ‘jungle’ now precisely and literally describes the situation. And the issue in this campaign is the encroaching jungle versus what remains of a shaken free society.”\(^{198}\)

With law and order now the focus of his campaign and domestic tranquility collapsing, Nixon reached out to those panicked suburbanites who could propel him into office. In his speeches, Nixon railed against those professors who encouraged students to take the law into their own hands, ultimately destroying the law and order that makes a free, civil society possible. Nixon warned audiences that radical extremism led only to anarchy and social dissolution. Yet, there remained that “silent center, the millions of people in the middle of the American political spectrum who do not demonstrate, who do not picket or protest loudly.” With proper leadership, “the silent center” could become a powerful majority capable of curbing unrest and renewing America’s international stature. According to Nixon, American lawlessness undermined the nation’s position as the leader of the free world. Turmoil at home weakened national resolve and diplomatic credibility. Without “the silent center” behind the Vietnam War and U.S. foreign policy in general, all could be lost. Fortunately for Nixon, his audiences ate it up. Journalist Theodore White recorded, “Wherever candidates paused to speak, wherever people gathered to listen, there could be no doubt in any bystander’s mind that law-and-order was indeed a legitimate

issue. The two surest-fire applause lines in any candidate’s speech were always his calls for ‘law-and-order’ at home and ‘peace’ in Vietnam.” Nixon loudly championed both. 199

Nixon had his doubts, though. His peace meant the preservation of non-communist South Vietnam, and he wondered whether Americans could sustain the war effort, much less support the means necessary to bring victory. On July 26, he commiserated with fellow hawk, President Lyndon Johnson. Nixon bemoaned the domestic situation, telling LBJ, “There are terrible pressures regarding Vietnam…. [Congress] is a whole group that believes we are losing the war, we’ve already lost. That’s the line.” Defending the Vietnamese continued to be the right course of action, but with Americans running away from the war, it was now “politically wrong.” Johnson and Nixon could agree that the war had made other nations stronger and that militarily the conflict was now turning in their favor, but things at home looked desperate. Nixon continued, “It isn’t just the Gallup and Harris reports. You know you can sense it.” Members of Congress who once stood with Nixon were now saying “you’ve got to change your position…. The war is lost.” Nixon refused to advocate a bombing pause and promised Johnson he would avoid Vietnam policy statements altogether as long as the administration kept him apprised of developments in Paris and any decision to move toward a bombing pause. Having reached a political bargain of sorts, the pair concluded their meeting secure in knowing the remaining hawks were few but resolute. 200


Though Nixon refused to divulge any specifics on his Vietnam plan before the August Republican Convention, his policies continued to evolve and adapt to domestic circumstances. He maintained great faith that the United States could bring triangular pressure on Hanoi by enlisting Chinese and Soviet help to end the war. Nixon told one interviewer that he would continue the war rather than abandon South Vietnam. Nixon continued, “The better choice is to use your military, economic, diplomatic and other power in concert in a way that will lead to a negotiated settlement.” As for de-Americanizing the war by strengthening ARVN forces and slowly removing U.S. men, Nixon was silent. With the convention looming, Whalen drafted this position but Nixon neither rejected nor embraced it, choosing instead to continue his silence on Vietnam.\(^\text{201}\)

In early July, Nixon’s campaign staff summarized his present Vietnam position. As president, Nixon would “strengthen [the] South Vietnamese [and] have them take over major burden of fighting.” Likewise he would avoid any escalation unless diplomacy and other efforts failed. Meanwhile, he would pursue negotiations and recruit the Soviet Union to help end the war. He would maintain the moratorium on Vietnam talk lest political and presumptive words break the delicate peace negotiations and refuse to accept any coalition government not elected by the South Vietnamese people. De-Americanization was absent from this summary.\(^\text{202}\)

His campaign team had not overlooked de-Americanization; like LBJ, Nixon was postponing the adoption of a de-escalatory policy until it became a political necessity. As

\(^{201}\) Diem, *Jaws of History*, 237; RN, Interview with Phil Clark, 7/12/1968, PPS 208:95:13, RNLBF.

the Paris peace talks began and law and order became his campaign’s focal point, Nixon returned to avoiding specifics on Vietnam. Only at the end of July with the Republican National Convention approaching did Nixon accept de-Americanization. To do otherwise would be to risk his nomination at the convention where he faced his long-time political rival and de-Americanization advocate, Nelson Rockefeller.

**Rockefeller & Kissinger: Stealing the Nomination with De-Americanization**

Richard Nixon was the probable Republican nominee in early 1968, but having unexpectedly lost his last two political contests, Nixon understood how tenuous his hold over party delegates was. With George Romney’s campaign killed by his 1967 comment about having been brainwashed on the war in Vietnam, Nixon’s potential rivals narrowed to the governor of California, Ronald Reagan, and the governor of New York, Nelson Rockefeller. Reagan and Rockefeller reflected the GOP’s divisions, representing the conservative and liberal wings respectively. But with the nation uncertain about the war, Nixon worried most about a potential Rockefeller candidacy. Indeed, in March, Nixon nervously admitted to journalist Theodore White that two things kept him up at night: Vietnam and a primary challenge by Nelson Rockefeller.203

Rockefeller had lost the Republican nomination to Barry Goldwater in 1964 and now appeared poised for a national comeback. Despite his frequent denials that he was running, Rockefeller and his team were developing a political strategy to seize the nomination at the Republican convention. Vietnam was central to this plan as his backers believed that he alone could reach out to Americans directly, uniting a divided country

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around a well-developed, well-articulated policy to achieve real peace and honor in Vietnam. Unlike Nixon, Rockefeller announced a concrete policy to end the war in the hope of catapulting his candidacy.

As in 1964, Henry Kissinger remained Rockefeller’s foremost foreign policy advisor and a constant supporter of Rockefeller’s political ambitions, and so Kissinger had the primary, though not sole, influence on his Vietnam policy. In the early 1960s, Kissinger had exploited the Vietnam crisis to bolster Rockefeller’s political career. As an adamant and consistent hawk, Kissinger had urged his patron to take a hard stand on Vietnam by supporting America’s defense of South Vietnam. Though Kissinger preferred the use of American airpower with the Vietnamese doing the fighting, he supported President Johnson’s Americanization of the war in 1965. With the war seemingly stalemated in 1967, Kissinger urged Rockefeller to resume his campaign for the White House by announcing a plan to preserve South Vietnam through limited bombing campaigns and pacification while seeking a negotiated settlement. Rockefeller declined to give this statement, but as Vietnam leapt to the forefront of American politics in 1968, Kissinger again played a prominent role in Rockefeller’s political and foreign policy calculations. Kissinger’s work on Rockefeller’s Vietnam statements proved his continued commitment to South Vietnam and preference for diplomacy backed by force. They also showed Kissinger’s reluctant acceptance of de-Americanization as a necessary concession to secure Rockefeller’s nomination. Together, Kissinger and Rockefeller brought additional pressure on the Republican Party to adopt a de-Americanization strategy at its convention.

Rockefeller’s support for George Romney and the former’s hesitancy to enter the race after Romney’s popularity waned made his nomination difficult but not impossible in
the eyes of his supporters. As late as March 21, Rockefeller announced, “I have decided
today to reiterate unequivocally that I am not a candidate campaigning directly or indirectly
for the presidency of the United States.” With LBJ out of the running, Rockefeller
continued to contemplate ways to win without actually seeking delegates in the primaries.
His staff argued Nixon only had surface support and that a “two-pronged strategy” to win
public support while covertly wooing delegates and conservative Republicans to his side
would work. They believed only Rockefeller had the “capacity to unify the country” and
by appealing directly to the American people as the electable Republican candidate, the
delegates would see reason and choose victory in November over the riskier Nixon
candidacy.

Kissinger offered his own thoughts on Rockefeller’s chances, arguing that Robert
F. Kennedy’s assassination on June 4 left a political vacuum Rockefeller could fill.
Kissinger urged the indecisive candidate to reach out to the disaffected students Kennedy
had attracted and make Vietnam his issue of choice. Kissinger believed Rockefeller still
had a shot at winning the Republican nomination due to the “vast reservoir of uneasiness
in the country.” Kissinger continued his appeal, “Many people will gag at the choice of
Nixon and Humphrey.” Governor Rockefeller need only appeal directly to the people,
displaying his unique blend of idealism and courage. The resulting groundswell of popular
support would then force the delegates to reconsider their votes for Nixon. From there,

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Plan for Winning the 1968 Republican Nomination,” 4/18/1968, folder 69, Box 8, Subseries 4 Notebooks
and Reports, Series J3 Politics—Oscar M. Ruebhausen Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC; and memo;
“Prelude to the ‘Summer Campaign,’ the Rockefeller Candidacy and Republican Politics April-May 1968”;
5/28/1968, folder 70, Box 8, Subseries 4 Notebooks and Reports, Series J3 Politics—Oscar M. Ruebhausen
Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.
Rockefeller could win the presidency, but at every point, Vietnam would be the foundation for political triumph.\footnote{Memo, HAK to NAR, “Meeting on National Needs after the Kennedy Assassination,” 6/9/1968, folder 3, Box 1, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series G-DNA, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC; and memo, HAK to NAR, “Where Are We Now in the Campaign?” 6/9/1968, folder 5, Box 1, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series G-DNA, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.}

Like Johnson and Nixon, Kissinger and Rockefeller understood that Tet had changed the domestic context, dictating a change in strategy. As Rockefeller’s staff surveyed American opinion, they found frustration with the war had actually increased hawkish sentiment and preference for escalation, particularly bombing. Most wanted to hit Hanoi hard out of retaliation for Tet and saw escalation as a means to end the war quickly. Yet, events convinced an increasing number of Americans that intervention had been a mistake. Rockefeller’s staff also noted, an “overwhelming majority of Americans see compromise, rather than victory, at the end of the road in Vietnam.” Given the changing mood, Rockefeller needed to offer something better than more bombing or vague platitudes about negotiated peace. Here, his staff’s analysis suggested a universally popular strategy—de-Americanizing the war by building up South Vietnamese forces. This policy garnered support from approximately seventy percent of doves and hawks. Kissinger was again in charge of developing Nelson Rockefeller’s Vietnam position but a program of unilateral reductions was never Kissinger’s first choice.\footnote{Memo, Lloyd A. Free, “Preliminary Report on American Opinion about Vietnam,” 3/15/1968, folder 247, Box 20, Subseries 3 Issues/People, Series 35 Ann C. Whitman, RG 15 NAR Gubernatorial, RFA, RAC.}

On March 27, Kissinger wrote to Rockefeller, assessing the situation overseas. He argued, “The military situation can be restored. But it is extremely unlikely that confidence will return to the countryside in any reasonable period of time. From this point of view the
war can no longer be ‘won’.” Kissinger rightly predicted peace talks would begin before the end of July but argued a new administration would have to change strategy in 1969. This president would have the difficult task of “winding up the war under honorable conditions; but it cannot do so if Hanoi believes that we are determined to get out at any price.” Kissinger believed Rockefeller could be that president, but the latter had not spoken publicly on Vietnam for two years. Thus, Kissinger planned a series of three speeches to reintroduce him to the national audience. He would attack President Johnson while outlining a coherent and popular plan to end the war as well as stabilize the world order.207

Kissinger assumed the task of writing these drafts and position papers with renewed vigor as he believed his long-term path to power hinged on Rockefeller’s election. He had served in this capacity for nearly ten years, and 1968 was another opportunity for both patron and advisor to advance. Vietnam was again pivotal, and Kissinger understood early April was the most politically opportune time to strike. The American people were keenly interested in Vietnam, and a comprehensive Vietnam statement would distinguish the Governor from Nixon. Kissinger predicted substantive talks would begin in five weeks or less and warned, “If you do not speak in detail on Vietnam this month you will be anticipated by events.” Again, Rockefeller vacillated. Nevertheless, as Kissinger formulated Rockefeller’s Vietnam strategy, he recorded his evolving views on Vietnam, leaving hints of what would come under Nixon’s prosecution of the war.208

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208 Memo, HAK to NAR, 4/8/1968, folder 247, Box 20, Subseries 3 Issues/People, Series 35 Ann C. Whitman, RG 15 NAR Gubernatorial, RFA, RAC.
Kissinger’s April and May drafts and memos critiqued the Johnson administration while offering a detailed alternative policy. Kissinger charged LBJ’s ad hoc decision-making had created a war best characterized as “a stalemate at an ever-increasing level of violence.” Kissinger faulted the very Americanization he himself had once supported. U.S. intervention had stripped the South Vietnamese of their self-reliance and self-confidence and “Americanized what should have been, above all, a Vietnamese enterprise.” Even if the war was a debacle, the stakes were too great to pull out. Kissinger argued, “What is at stake, however, is not only peace in Vietnam but security and stability in Asia and ultimately peace throughout the world.” America’s prestige and global credibility hinged on the outcome there. The only “real alternatives” were to continue escalating the war or try to reach a comprehensive settlement. Kissinger favored the latter but noted even then, “Diplomacy can only reflect the situation on the ground in South Vietnam, not serve as a substitute for it.”

Thus, Kissinger contended the focus of U.S. efforts should be on the South. The South Vietnamese government needed to develop political legitimacy in the eyes of its people, perhaps by broadening its government. America and its South Vietnamese allies should make every effort to secure the population and pacify the countryside. Significantly, Kissinger further argued, “The Americanization of the effort, military and civilian, should be reversed.” Best estimates predicted ARVN forces could become

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capable of fighting both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army alone in three years. The United States should then prepare the South Vietnamese to take over the war while devoting American resources to air and artillery support. If elected, Rockefeller would increase South Vietnamese mobilization and training, cap the U.S. commitment at the present level, and then “in a measurable time begin to reverse it.” Nowhere did Kissinger countenance abandoning South Vietnam.\(^{210}\)

Kissinger, perhaps even more than his patron, sought to give the South Vietnamese a “full opportunity” to become self-sufficient. Kissinger opposed any coalition government with Communists, particularly as he believed Hanoi dominated the National Liberation Front’s leadership and organization.\(^{211}\) What South Vietnam needed was continued U.S. support and the time necessary to pacify the countryside, stabilize the country, and expand political legitimacy and control; Kissinger estimated three years. Any settlement in the next six months would thus be premature and risk the Republic of Vietnam, and improving the allied position in South Vietnam would better their bargaining power. Given this commitment to the Republic of Vietnam, peace talks would revolve around South Vietnamese legitimacy and mutual withdrawal. Productive negotiations seemed unlikely, though. The formula LBJ announced in 1967 at San Antonio—no unconditional bombing halt until Hanoi agreed to limit its own aggression in the South and not take advantage of the halt—remained in effect and was a nonstarter for the North

\(^{210}\) Ibid; and memo, HAK to NAR, “Possible Goals for Vietnam Negotiations,” 6/25/1968, folder 10, Box 2, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series G-DNA, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.

Vietnamese. For Kissinger, stalled talks were a good thing. Kissinger informed Rockefeller, “The more time elapses to give us time to recover from the Tet offensive the better. *The San Antonio formula is thus not a bad device for stalling for time as long as we do not take it too seriously.*”

Besides, Kissinger reasoned that only the genuine threat of U.S. retaliation would keep Hanoi honest and North Vietnamese infiltration down. Words on paper were meaningless without the power to sustain them. Hanoi recognized the diplomatic value of military pressure, and Kissinger believed they were now rapidly pouring men and material southward, escalating the war in South Vietnam to improve their negotiating posture in Paris. If Kissinger were leading the diplomatic effort, the United States would make proposed North Vietnamese restraints clear and then stop the bombing unilaterally. If Hanoi continued its aggression at the present level or increased it, America would resume the bombing. Likewise, Kissinger held, “The surest way for the negotiations to fail is to indicate that we will withdraw unilaterally if they stalemate.” In other words, Hanoi would simply wait the United States out if they concluded America had “determined to withdraw at any price.”

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Instead, should the talks break down, U.S. policymakers would have no other option but to continue prosecuting the war, and under no circumstances could they begin unilateral withdrawals or de-escalation. The latter course would not only jeopardize the war, it “would shake the U.S. international position and detract from international stability generally.” The talks themselves had already caused Asian allies great concern as they feared they might represent a collapse of American will and an impending abandonment of South Vietnam. So if Hanoi balked after American overtures, the President should resume northern bombing, stop troop reductions, and escalate the war. In short, Kissinger advocated a strategy that developed South Vietnamese defense and expanded its control while negotiations enshrined the allied advantage and preserved American credibility abroad. The United States would continue talking while fighting, just with the Vietnamese assuming a larger proportion of the fighting. All policies Kissinger advanced in the Nixon White House a year later.214

Yet, Kissinger acknowledged that America’s internal divisions and unrest necessitated a non-military strategy and negotiations or at the very least, the appearance of active diplomacy. Working on another Rockefeller speech, Kissinger noted, “To be sure we have massive problems at home….Foreign and domestic problems are inextricably intertwined.” International student unrest combined with the Vietnam War left the world

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in a dangerous state of uncertainty and turmoil. Kissinger was drawing on his conservative faith that progress and peace required order and stability. Writing a line fit for Nixon’s law and order politics, Kissinger argued, “Our nation has rarely been so divided or so confused….But before there can be a system of order, there must be a concept of order.” The militant students and “unloving critics” of traditional institutions had forgotten this truth and so threatened global stability. Kissinger hoped peace talks and some de-Americanization would ameliorate the domestic political climate and give people a palatable way to support U.S. efforts in Vietnam.215

All of these thoughts on Vietnam, domestic politics, and unrest congealed into Nelson Rockefeller’s July 13 speech and accompanying white paper on Vietnam. After winning the Massachusetts Republican primary as a write-in candidate, Rockefeller gave a speech on May 1 advocating a thorough review of Vietnam policy and a preference for de-Americanization, but he never defined what his exact policy would entail. Rockefeller now hoped that by announcing a detailed Vietnam plan he could distinguish himself from Nixon and build popular support for his candidacy. Failing that, Rockefeller hoped that his program would at least become the model for the Republican Vietnam platform.216

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Kissinger took the lead in drafting the speech, but other members of the NAR team tempered his hawkish stance. Chief speechwriter Emmett Hughes pushed Rockefeller to advocate U.S. withdrawal whereas Kissinger countered America could not abandon its commitment to South Vietnam. General James Gavin, who was advising the Rockefeller campaign, also proposed the speech take a dovish stance by pledging an enclave strategy and bombing halt. This interplay was evident in the drafting process and it exposed just how resistant Kissinger was to unilateral American reductions. Only grudgingly did he accept their political necessity for the sake of his candidate, and thus was not beholden to Vietnamization in the Nixon administration.\footnote{Isaacson, \textit{Kissinger}, 125-126; and R.W. Apple Jr., “Rockefeller Gives Four-Stage Plan to End the War,” \textit{New York Times}, 7/14/1968, p.50.}

Kissinger’s drafts proposed only the smallest of reductions with real U.S. troop withdrawals contingent on the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces. Rockefeller would make only a “token” reduction of seventy-five thousand troops at the beginning of his term. Instead of steady withdrawals, “The United States would indicate its willingness to withdraw its forces \textit{in proportion as other outside forces are withdrawn}.” Kissinger’s five-year peace plan would redeploy U.S. forces \textit{within} South Vietnam to protect population centers and again only remove them completely on a mutual withdrawal basis. For Rockefeller and Hughes, Kissinger’s “de-Americanization” did not go far enough.\footnote{Draft I of July Speech, 1968, folder 9, Box 2, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series G-DNA, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC (italics added); and draft III of July speech, HAK, 1968, folder 24, Box 3, Subseries 1 Current Issues, Series J3 Politics—Oscar M. Ruebhausen Files, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.}

Later drafts kept the emphasis on negotiated mutual withdrawal but added a commitment to bring U.S. boys home steadily. Given domestic politics and problems, the
fourth draft argued, “A change in our Vietnam strategy in the direction of de-
Americanizing the war is necessary whatever Hanoi’s actions.” By securing the South
Vietnamese population and building up ARVN forces by giving them modern weapons,
“the United States should be able to begin withdrawing its forces” regardless of Hanoi’s
coopration. Rockefeller promised to withdraw 100,000 troops in the first year, reassessing
the situation thereafter to plan future redeployments. The final white paper, “A Program
for Peace in Vietnam,” summarized Rockefeller’s de-Americanization neatly:

A de-Americanization of the war to enable us to reduce, substantially, American
forces—whether or not Hanoi cooperates. Such a clear-cut plan cannot possibly
weaken our negotiating position in the preliminary talks about the cessation of
bombing which are now taking place. On the contrary, we can only strengthen our
position in the substantive discussions to come, by such specific testimony to the
integrity and force of our will for peace.

Reducing the American presence on the ground in South Vietnam should lessen U.S.
casualties and encourage South Vietnamese responsibility. These actions would prolong
domestic stamina to continue the war and demonstrate North Vietnam could neither outlast
American will nor defeat South Vietnamese strength.219

Overall, Nelson Rockefeller took Kissinger’s rhetoric and policies and toned them
down. Despite the year’s travails, Kissinger remained a committed hawk, not willing to
abandon South Vietnam. Kissinger believed it was time for negotiations to begin in earnest
and that U.S. diplomats should buttress their negotiating positions by keeping military
forms of persuasion on the table. In working for the Rockefeller campaign, though,

219 Draft IV of July Speech, 1968, folder 9, Box 2, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series G-DNA, RG 4
NAR Personal, RFA, RAC; Press Release, NAR, 7/13/1968, folder 9, Box 2, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series
folder 12, Box 2, Subseries 1 Notebooks, Series G-DNA, RG 4 NAR Personal, RFA, RAC.
Kissinger had to concede American politics dictated an exit strategy for bringing soldiers home. As in the past, Rockefeller took Kissinger’s ideas and made them his own. Rockefeller not only outlined a program for the gradual de-Americanization of the war but also proposed free elections in the Republic of Vietnam followed by the eventual reunification of the two Vietnamese countries. This position ran far to the left of most Republicans and encouraged party doves.220

Rockefeller’s campaign never gained enough traction to upset the frontrunner, Richard Nixon, but his candidacy articulated the clearest statement yet on de-Americanization. After the disastrously conservative Goldwater campaign, the GOP wanted a centrist platform, and Rockefeller sent Kissinger to Miami in advance of the convention to work with Nixon and Laird on the Vietnam plank and to prevent the hawks from taking over. Hence, 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.

**Republicans United: The GOP Convention**

Three major factions arrived in Miami before the start of the Republican Convention to hammer out the Vietnam plank with as little acrimony as possible. The presumptive nominee, Richard Nixon, wanted a moderate document that would appeal to all sides while giving him maximum flexibility once in office. Nelson Rockefeller, having little chance of stealing the nomination, hoped to outflank the hawks and influence the party’s position on Vietnam. Finally, there was Congressman Melvin Laird—a man,

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220 Interview, Bernard Kalb of NAR, 9/19/1972, folder 157, Box 10, Subseries 3 Pre-Vice Presidential Speeches, Series 12 Joseph Persico Files, RG 26 NAR VP, RFA, RAC.
contemporary commentators noted “thrives on the intrigues of national conventions”—who sought to compose a popular platform that could deliver the nation from unrest at home, war abroad, and give the White House to a worthy Republican.  They were three powerful men, each reflecting different parts of the party, yet they each came to Miami with a basic commitment to de-Americanizing the war.

The conservative hawks so ascendant in 1964 were still present in 1968, though. No longer worried about Rockefeller, Nixon feared Ronald Reagan could catch the conservative imagination and the votes of Southern delegates. Nixon needed these votes to lock up the nomination on the first ballot. Reagan endorsed escalation to win the war, including bombing and mining North Vietnam. He also refused to rule out the possible use of nuclear weapons or a South Vietnamese invasion of the North. Nixon certainly shared Reagan’s hawkish sentiment but recognized the political futility of espousing it after Tet. A representative from the Veterans of Foreign Wars also spoke for the far right as he addressed a platform sub-committee and urged Republicans to adopt a Vietnam plank that would declare American readiness to “take whatever steps are necessary to conclude the war with victory.” Conversely, there were Republican doves at these debates calling for the peaceful neutralization of all of Southeast Asia, but the hawks held far greater sway. Only a person skilled at the art of political wheeling and dealing could bring all sides together.

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221 Hess and Broder, *The Republican Establishment*, 375.
222 As it happened, each claimed singular credit for the Vietnam plank’s promise to de-Americanize the war, leading to much historiographic confusion. Multiple archives and sources reveal the complete picture. All three came together on the wording of the Vietnam platform as its final form was an amalgam of their individual drafts. Especial thanks goes to the Rockefeller Family Archives whose collection helped clear this confusion up.
223 It was still a close vote. Nixon needed 667 votes and received 692.
together and convince conservatives to accept the gradual de-Americanization of the
war.\textsuperscript{224}

Melvin Laird was the arbiter of the GOP platform draft. Having worked on the
1964 platform, Laird initially declined the responsibility, but power and politics proved too
tempting. More important still, Laird believed the stakes were too great in 1968 to allow
bitter party divisions to mar the Republican image or adopt a hawkish platform.

Unlike Nixon who saw domestic unrest and de-Americanization as political
expedients, Laird believed rising turmoil at home and frustration over the war necessitated
de-escalation in Vietnam. To do otherwise would be to flirt with national catastrophe. In
his January 1968 \textit{Republican Papers}, Vietnamization’s eventual architect wrote, “In a very
real sense, American society seemed to be coming apart.” Addressing Congress that same
month, Laird said American society was breaking down due to internal turmoil and foreign
war. He continued, “Americans would do anything honorable to bring about a lasting
peace both at home and abroad.” Laird saw troop withdrawals as a means to alleviate this
tension, and during the primaries he insisted Nixon make them a campaign pledge.
Formerly prominent among the war hawks, Laird remained committed to preserving South
Vietnam but increasing problems at home convinced him the nation was on the precipice
of disaster. Laird arrived in Miami a week early to begin ghostwriting the platform.\textsuperscript{225}

\textsuperscript{224} Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page, \textit{An American Melodrama: The Presidential
Campaign of 1968} (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 435-439; LaFeber, \textit{The Deadly Bet}, 110; memo,
Molitor Papers, R. Related Special Collections, RAC; and Brigadier General James Hittle, Statement before
the Sub-Committee on Foreign Policy and National Security Republican Platform Committee, 7/22/1968,
PPS 500:71:5, RNLBF.

\textsuperscript{225} Laird, ed. \textit{The Republican Papers} (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), ix; and Laird, “The
Laird immediately sought to impress the seriousness of the situation upon his fellow Republicans. Addressing key members, Laird opened, “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 pressed upon them his belief that “in a very real sense, this society of ours seems to be coming apart.” The Republican Coordinating Committee agreed with his assessment, noting that because of all the violent unrest, “today no one is safe on the streets, in his home or in his property” and that the nation was “rapidly approaching a state of anarchy.” For Laird, the GOP platform on Vietnam would have to show a willingness to ameliorate social tension while maintaining a sense of direction on foreign affairs. De-Americanizing the Vietnam War was critical to this mission. Fortunately, building up South Vietnamese replacement forces and de-Americanizing the war united the three most powerful actors at the convention: Laird, Nixon, and Rockefeller.226

Laird’s early drafts repeated the tired Republican accusations against President Johnson’s Vietnam policies but finally made a clear commitment to reduce the American presence there. These drafts blamed the Johnson administration for failing to train and equip the South Vietnamese military. Instead, LBJ Americanized an otherwise Asian war in a “piecemeal” fashion, providing just enough to stave off defeat while failing to employ the weight of American air and naval superiority against North Vietnam. Johnson and his advisers had also overlooked the political development necessary for Vietnamese

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226 “Statement of the Honorable Melvin Laird before the full Committee on Resolutions,” 7/29/1968, folder “Speeches- 8/15/72, Resolution Committee, Republican National Conv. (3),” Box A94, LP, GFL; and Republican Coordinating Committee, “Riots,” 7/24/1967, PPS 500:70:11, RNLBF.
responsibility and security. A Republican president would correct these problems. The Republican Party pledged “a realistic strategy” that placed the Vietnamese on a proper footing so that they could “fight for their own survival and self-determination,” emphasized pacification, and would “permit progressive reduction of American ground involvement.” Above all, Laird’s drafts promised, “We will de-Americanize the present war.”

By the start of the convention, Nixon had concluded that a commitment to de-Americanization was essential to winning the GOP nomination and November election. Presumably, this change reflected political necessity as Nixon sought to prevent Rockefeller from outflanking him on Vietnam and stealing the nomination. Per Nixon’s instructions, Richard Whalen had begun drafting this position and platform statement in July. Nixon neither accepted nor rejected Whalen’s dovish language on the war, though the candidate had always emphasized South Vietnamese responsibility and hinted at possible U.S. reductions after the ARVN gained sufficient strength. Then in late July (after Rockefeller had pledged progressive de-Americanization), Nixon modified Whalen’s draft and fused the two key aspects of Vietnamization: the buildup of South Vietnamese forces and the withdrawal of American troops. Addressing the GOP 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 on August 6.

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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 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.” American troop withdrawals had become a key element of his stated foreign policy.

Indeed, de-Americanization proved a rallying point for all but the most ardent hawks and doves. Party dove George Romney supported neutralizing Indochina but also told the platform committee that “the key to a successful strategy is an expansion of the South Vietnamese role and contraction of the American role.” For moderate hawks, this strategy held out the hope of long-term success as it refused to abandon South Vietnam and hearkened back to Eisenhower’s focus on indigenous self-defense. Further, the majority’s emphasis on negotiations and absence of bellicose rhetoric demonstrated Republicans fervently sought to avoid a repeat of 1964. Previously, they had promised to do whatever was necessary to achieve military “victory” and lost in a landslide. Now they came together to construct the least objectionable platform.

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228 Chester, Hodgson, and Page, _An American Melodrama_, 464.
As of August 1, the Vietnam plank was still in committee, and Rockefeller worried the existing version inconsistently promised military escalation and de-Americanization. With Kissinger already in Miami to monitor the convention and represent Rockefeller, he instructed his aide to take the Laird platform draft and work out a suitable plank with the Nixon team that firmly committed the party to peace in Vietnam. Like Nixon, Kissinger had reluctantly accepted the prospect of U.S. troop reductions. Both hoped a settlement could uphold American interests and preserve the Republic of Vietnam but South Vietnam needed time to strengthen. Working with Nixon’s foreign policy advisor, Richard Allen, Kissinger and his team drafted a GOP compromise plank that used Nixon’s campaign language, Rockefeller’s Vietnam proposals, and Laird’s platform draft.231

Kissinger’s drafts were indeed cut-and-pasted.232 Kissinger lifted whole sections from the aforementioned sources while occasionally borrowing some of Romney’s dovish language. This patchwork process worked because, as the drafters acknowledged, these powerful Republican leaders shared “a wide area of agreement and no significant area of disagreement.” Tellingly, they excluded Reagan and the hawks from this process. Laird, Nixon, and Rockefeller favored South Vietnamese training, expansion, and improvement so that they could assume the burden of the fighting. And all three men believed this alternative source of manpower would “permit a progressive de-Americanization of the war.” Kissinger preferred Rockefeller’s language on progressive reductions to Nixon’s

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232 The Rockefeller Archive Center holds these drafts, complete with contemporaneous annotations explaining line-by-line where the material came from.
phased-in/out dichotomy but the concept was the same. On matters of peace and negotiations, they promised meaningful talks that would produce an honorable peace—“neither peace at any price nor a camouflaged surrender.” In sum, Kissinger’s drafts (like Nixon and Laird’s) accepted the reality that American frustration with the war required a new strategy—de-Americanization with ongoing negotiations—without depriving the GOP nominee of sufficient flexibility either on the campaign trail or later in the Oval Office. The updated plank could please all without compromising military progress or severely restricting a Republican president’s options.233

Kissinger’s team had accomplished Rockefeller’s goal; they had crafted a platform that addressed the public’s concern over the war and built Republican consensus on peace in Vietnam. One commentator aptly called it “a masterpiece of political carpentry.”234 Upon receiving the draft, conservatives suggested only minor changes, which Rockefeller and Nixon quickly accepted. Early Sunday morning, August 4th, Republicans approved the Vietnam plank.

The final Vietnam platform promised the American troop reductions that had been unthinkable a year ago. The plank condemned the Johnson administration for embroiling America in a costly land war and for its lack of credibility. Republicans pledged to “to adopt a strategy relevant to the real problems of the war….It will be a strategy permitting a progressive de-Americanization of the war, both military and civilian.”

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234 Quoted in Johns, Vietnam’s Second Front, 213.
Vietnamese strength was necessary for these withdrawals, and so they promised policies that would “enable and induce the South Vietnamese to assume increasing responsibility.” The plank further promised vigorous 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.

As it happened, Nixon easily won the nomination and immediately began unifying the party while preparing for the general election. Republicans were 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 normal 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 rhetorical and political groundwork for what Melvin Laird would later term Vietnamization.

The nation and the Republican Party had turned a corner on Vietnam. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford had capped the American troop commitment, and now Republicans were promising to de-Americanize the war, gradually reducing the number of soldiers in

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South Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger could scarcely countenance this policy as the year began but they had now worked together with Laird to make it a stated goal. Looking back on the convention and the Vietnam plank decades later, Mel Laird still believed “the most important sentence in that platform sets forth a policy of de-Americanizing’ the war.”\textsuperscript{237} Vietnamization was his strategy, and he became its greatest (and sometimes only) champion and defender in the Nixon White House.

But all this talk of de-escalation had international repercussions. Political interests and concerns over unrest at home, not optimistic assessments of ARVN strength, had driven these Republican hawks to accept de-Americanization. America’s allies and enemies recognized domestic circumstances were dictating the evolving strategy in Vietnam as well as broader U.S. foreign policy. To give in to public pressures could weaken American credibility and embolden Communists worldwide; to ignore domestic needs would invite social unrest and isolationism, destroying the support necessary to sustain postwar internationalism. Kissinger captured the moment perfectly, “Every significant foreign policy decision has consequences—in that sense the domino theory is correct. The question is however not whether there are consequences but whether we can live with them.”\textsuperscript{238}

\textsuperscript{238} Memo, “Vietnam,” 4/1968, folder 114, Box 8, Subseries 2 Kissinger Reports, Series 35 Ann C. Whitman, RG 15 NAR Gubernatorial, RFA, RAC.
4. The Other Domino:

America’s Domestic Front & the Global Cold War, January-August 1968

That seminal 1968 event, the Tet Offensive, was part of Hanoi’s strategy to win the war militarily that very year, yet it had unexpected international ramifications, each building upon one another. As has been mentioned, its greatest effect was upon America’s policymakers, presidential candidates, and public. In turn, global actors read the U.S. domestic context and reformulated their own foreign policies.

From Hanoi to Saigon, from Canberra to London, world leaders speculated American resolve was crumbling and that de-escalation and disengagement were coming as Tet’s impact radiated outward in concentric circles from Vietnam. The Tet Offensive seemingly shook the foundation of America’s support for the Vietnam War. President Lyndon Johnson’s March 31 speech stunned international officials both for his decision not to seek reelection and to begin negotiations in earnest. The following months’ assassinations, displays of student radicalism, protests, and race riots compounded this sense of shock and uncertainty. Certainly global policymakers anticipated some U.S. strategic retrenchment was necessary in the wake of 1968’s domestic problems but there was a delicate balance between retrenchment and isolationism. Hanoi counted on the latter to force America’s exit from Vietnam. Meanwhile, allies feared that frustration in Vietnam and turmoil at home would precipitate a groundswell of isolationism, which would push U.S. cost cutting and retrenchment too far. Their early reactions bordered on wild alarmism. By year’s end, sober officials predicted deliberate retrenchment and de-Americanization, but the first wave of memos and assessments provide a sense of 1968’s uncertainty.
Even as they looked to the United States for direction, foreign leaders attempted to influence events in their favor. North Vietnam pressed on towards victory using U.S. turmoil for propaganda but only belatedly taking advantage of U.S. domestic problems and the election to encourage America’s unilateral de-escalation of the war. Having the most to lose, South Vietnam responded vigorously to the Tet Offensive and debates in Washington. Contrary to the existing historiography, Saigon embraced de-Americanization in 1968, seeing it as a means to lessen American public and political pressure to end the war. Similarly, Australians worried domestic concerns and growing isolationism could force Washington to abandon South Vietnam as well as America’s other commitments. Australia depended upon regional pacts to contain Communism and prevent Communist nations from obtaining key geostrategic points, and so uncertainty in U.S. resolve prompted a thorough reevaluation of its grand strategy. Finally, Great Britain extrapolated the crisis in Vietnam and America all the way to Western Europe. They worried that continued stalemate or outright defeat in Vietnam could unleash rampant isolationism and congressional scrutiny of U.S. pledges worldwide. Britain predicated its Cold War security on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but congressional cuts to U.S. forces in Europe seemed imminent. As evidenced by these nations’ fears and changing policies, Vietnam and its effects on American policy were components of a greater international calculus.

Thus, global policymakers could interpret LBJ’s tentative de-escalation and negotiations as evidence of America’s faltering will and coming abandonment or as a necessary sop to opinion at home. The perceived reasons and manner of U.S. retrenchment mattered. If domestic unrest and popular sentiment were driving American foreign policy,
then all had reason to fear. Most officials in Canberra and London still held to a version of the domino theory. And critically, they recognized that the American home front was itself a domino. They believed that if it fell and America turned inward, then not only would South Vietnam be lost, so would other commitments, if not entire nations and the whole order of postwar internationalism. Such an extreme outcome was unlikely, but watching America’s travails and looking years into the future, foreign officials often assumed the worst. Moreover, these 1968 developments and discussions framed the context wherein world leaders interpreted Richard Nixon’s 1969 Vietnamization policy. America was not just getting out or staying in Vietnam; Vietnam was a test case for America’s global leadership. The manner of America’s exit from Vietnam mattered.

**Hanoi: Onwards to Victory**

The Tet Offensive, which prompted America’s first serious reexamination of Vietnam strategy with all of its attendant effects on presidential politics and global commitments, was the product of North Vietnamese leader Le Duan’s resolute will and vision of a united, Communist Vietnam. From humble origins in central Vietnam, Le Duan joined the anti-colonialist and Communist movements at a young age. His incarceration by the French regime during the 1930s and 1940s further hardened him into an ardent Communist revolutionary. During the First Indochina War, Le Duan led nationalist fighters in southern Vietnam. Thereafter, he continued to organize guerillas, preparing for an eventual war with the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese regime. Northern leaders like Ho Chi Minh meanwhile struggled in the transition from war to peace. The 1954 Geneva settlement had left Vietnam divided, and North Vietnam’s land reform and industrialization campaigns provoked sporadic rebellions and encouraged intellectual dissent. Working
with southern insurgents, Le Duan avoided these travails. His outsider status facilitated his rise upon his return to Hanoi, and he immediately began consolidating power and moving North Vietnam toward war. As First Secretary, Le Duan may have appeared a "bland figure" among the North Vietnamese cadre but behind the scenes he steadily worked to secure this goal, creating a repressive police state that used purges when necessary to keep his country on the path toward violent reunification.²³⁹

At each critical juncture, Le Duan and his trusted compatriot Le Duc Tho were there, pushing Hanoi towards a total war to reunite Vietnam. With a firm grip on the Southern revolutionaries and political power in Hanoi, Le Duan first aided the insurgency and then in 1964, launched the General Offensive and General Uprising (GO-GU) to dissuade the United States from intervening. Le Duan trusted that a major offensive would incite mass insurrection in South Vietnam, causing the Republic of Vietnam to crumble and leaving American forces powerless to change the situation. Le Duan’s gamble failed. President Johnson intervened in force, first with bombing, then with troops, but Le Duan matched them man for man as the war ground to a stalemate. Challenged at home in 1967, Le Duan purged supposed “revisionists”—those who favored negotiations and/or associated with the Soviets, who also supported this strategy. Le Duan remained fixated on achieving reunification through military victory and by removing any apparent domestic challenger, he was free to develop a major election-year offensive to topple the Saigon regime and thus negotiate from a position of overwhelming strength and control.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ See Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 3, 17, 20, 24, 30-35, 40-41.
²⁴⁰ Ibid., 49-50, 63-65, 75-78, 90.
It is imperative that one understand Le Duan intended the Tet Offensive to produce decisive victory in 1968, not cripple America’s political will. He pinned his hopes on the Tet Offensive as he sought again to prompt a general uprising by striking South Vietnamese urban centers. In late 1967, North Vietnamese statements indicating they would begin negotiations once Johnson stopped bombing the North were merely skillful ploys to divert attention away from pre-Tet preparations. Only after the Tet Offensive failed to achieve military victory did Le Duan as well as Southern cadres begin emphasizing their effect in the United States.241

Trumpeting Washington’s weakness and doubt was a way of turning defeat into a propaganda victory. The Tet Offensive had proved a costly gamble with huge military losses that crippled the Southern Communist infrastructure. The GO-GU strategy and later negotiations upset relations with North Vietnam’s patron, China, which had pushed for prolonged guerilla warfare and avoiding negotiations. And contrary to Le Duan’s plan, the Tet Offensive revitalized the South Vietnamese government and led to a general mobilization and expansion of ARVN forces. Yet, Tet’s domestic consequences in America provided an uncertain silver lining. On February 11, North Vietnamese news organs argued Tet was a heavy, “revolutionary blow” to U.S. policymakers that left them “bewildered and embarrassed,” having destroyed the “last hope of the hard-core hawks” for military victory. Lacking battlefield or diplomatic success, Hanoi claimed the

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241 Ibid., 90, 112-113; and Ang, The Vietnam War from the Other Side, 126.
American domestic front had been one of their chief targets all along and used U.S. and world opinion to encourage their forces to remain strong as they pressed on to victory.\(^{242}\)

LBJ’s March 31 speech and limited bombing pause seemed to confirm that Washington was moving towards de-escalation and disengagement, and Hanoi sought to capitalize on this development. One North Vietnamese leader recalled they discussed these developments among ourselves and concluded that the U.S. must be in great difficulty. Who could be greater than Johnson as President of the United States? Who could yield as much power as McNamara while he was secretary of defense? Who would have his name linked to the Vietnam conflict as closely as Westmoreland? It was clear that the United States had reached a dead end in Vietnam.\(^{243}\)

Successive events seemed to confirm this conclusion. Clark Clifford’s April 11 press conference put a tentative cap on the number of American soldiers in Vietnam. Westmoreland’s replacement as MACV commander also seemed to indicate a softening U.S. position. Nevertheless, Hanoi saw LBJ’s peace overtures as a balm for U.S. public opinion, doubted he would make any real concessions, and recognized the president’s continued preference for renewed bombing. Throughout 1968, North Vietnamese leaders continued to fear Johnson would “pour in more troops and money,” again escalating the war. Yet, Le Duan believed American vacillation and talks gave another opportunity for victory.\(^{244}\)


Indeed, Le Duan had no desire for peace in 1968. Le Duan hesitantly moved toward a talk and fight strategy while ordering successive offensives to try and create the mass revolt necessary to topple the Thieu regime. International diplomacy could win over world opinion and encourage American doves to bring new pressure on their government, forcing unilateral de-escalation. Peace talks could also bring insight into the evolving U.S. strategy, alienate Washington from the regime in Saigon, and hopefully produce a complete unconditional bombing halt of North Vietnam. Diplomacy offered many advantages, but Le Duan’s focus remained on the Southern battlefield. On April 24th, the North Vietnamese Politburo authorized the Tet Offensive’s second phase (May 4 through August 17) to achieve military victory. Even as talks began in Paris on May 13, North Vietnamese infiltration and the number of American casualties were increasing in South Vietnam. For Le Duan, the American home front and Paris peace talks were secondary and tertiary theaters.  

Historian Lien-Hang T. Nguyen rightly argued, “Just like Johnson, Le Duan did not abandon his objectives in 1968, he merely changed his tactics to salvage a policy that had failed to produce immediate results.” Neither was willing to abandon South Vietnam. Whereas a worrisome domestic situation held President Johnson in check, Le Duan’s repressive police state left him unchallenged at home. Only punishing U.S. firepower and increasing South Vietnamese solidarity kept him from his objectives in the South. As the

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third Tet Offensive (August 17 through September 30) failed, Le Duan reluctantly chose negotiations to stop the American bombardment of his country and hopefully encourage further unilateral U.S. de-escalation. So far, his bid for decisive military victory in 1968 had sacrificed the Communists’ dominant position in the countryside, damaged the revolutionary infrastructure there, and amassed thousands of casualties. Nevertheless, unease and presidential politics in America indicated Hanoi’s persistence could pay off. Surprisingly, these same circumstances inspired their foes in Saigon to do more to save their Vietnam.246

Saigon: Onwards to Victory with De-Americanization

While Le Duan could treat America’s domestic unrest, politics, and increasing dovish sentiment as an unexpected benefit of the Tet Offensive, South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu knew these developments did not bode well for his nation. Far more than their Northern counterparts, the South Vietnamese had no choice but to take them seriously. All recognized their junior status in this Cold War relationship and that their country’s survival was at the mercy of American events in 1968. In the wake of the Tet Offensive and Johnson’s March 31 speech, Thieu and others concluded that America was at best an unsteady partner and so South Vietnam had to quickly strengthen itself. In short, America’s faltering home front encouraged the South Vietnamese to fight harder and mobilize their manpower resources in anticipation of the day they would stand alone. Once again, Vietnamization had U.S. domestic origins as South Vietnamese reacted to American

246 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 115, 121-122.
developments and created the mobilization framework that later allowed President Nixon to implement and justify his Vietnamization program.

Following the military coup that resulted in President Ngo Dinh Diem’s assassination in November 1963, the Republic of Vietnam went through a series of civilian and military governments until Thieu’s military faction ascended to power in 1965. Having fought against the Vietminh in the First Indochina War, Thieu was a cautious and determined individual. A committed anticomunist with political aspirations, he outflanked his South Vietnamese rivals after 1965. With a new constitution in place, Thieu won the 1967 presidential election and continued to lead his country until the Republic of Vietnam was on the brink of collapse in 1975. If the elected Thieu regime was no different from its predecessors in terms of corruption and military domination, Thieu at least asserted South Vietnamese independence, not willing to sacrifice his country’s interest to serve America’s foreign and domestic needs. After Tet, Thieu attempted to refashion the Republic of Vietnam into a force capable of deflecting North Vietnamese ambition and U.S. self-interests.247

Indeed, the Tet Offensive proved a watershed for the Republic of Vietnam. The South Vietnamese military had long been expanding and improving, but the Tet Offensive and the resulting American uncertainty proved the catalyst for significant change. Tet was a time of peace and celebration marking the Vietnamese New Year, and the Communist violence, particularly the massacre of civilians at Hue, upset Vietnamese sensibilities. Contrary to Le Duan’s intention, Tet provoked general support for the Republic of Vietnam

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247 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 137-138; and John Prados, “The Shape of the Table: Nguyen Van Thieu and Negotiations to End the Conflict” in The Search for Peace, 356.
and Thieu government; what U.S. ambassador Ellsworth Bunker called “the great spirit of unity.” Moreover, given the onslaught, ARVN forces did well during the offensive. Thieu would marshal this fervor, mobilizing South Vietnamese manpower to build a much larger army that he hoped would become sufficient to defend South Vietnam without American forces.248

Even before President Johnson’s March 31 speech, South Vietnamese were reading developments in the United States with growing alarm. In mid-March, Thieu rightly interpreted the North Vietnamese offensive as “an all-out attempt to finish the war in 1968” and he believed that a second offensive was in the works. The South Vietnamese had performed well, and as he told the British ambassador, any apprehension then stemmed from the upcoming U.S. election and Tet’s effect on public opinion there. He explained that the Vietnamese feared a repeat of the French abandonment that had left Communists in control of half the country. Several days later his ambassador in Washington, Bui Diem, received a browbeating lecture from Clark Clifford on the U.S. domestic situation. Diem had long recognized the deteriorating public support for the war, but Clifford’s speech confirmed these fears. Clifford told Diem that U.S. policymakers were uncertain how long Americans would continue to back the war. Clifford reasoned, “We are losing supporters for this effort every day, and that the challenge is to find some solution to the war within the period while our public is still prepared to support it.” In other words, they would have

to negotiate an end to the fighting before Americans pulled the plug on the war prematurely. Passing Clifford’s words on to President Thieu, both Diem and Thieu understood how tenuous the U.S. commitment had become.\footnote{Dispatch, C.M. MacLehose, “Call on President Thieu, March 13” Saigon, 3/14/1968, FCO 15/698, PRO; memo, Richard Steadman, 3/20/1968, #14, folder “Memoranda of Conversation,” Box 7, CCP, LBJPL; and Diem, \textit{Jaws of History}, 222, 228.}

President Johnson’s speech confirmed the dangers South Vietnam faced and that time was running out. Thieu saw LBJ’s speech and refusal to run as a turning point, concluding “that there is now a serious danger that sooner or later the Americans will pull out” regardless of the North Vietnamese presence.\footnote{Telegram, Ambassador in Viet-Nam C.M. MacLehose to Foreign Office, “President Thieu,” 4/2/1968, DEFE 11/696, PRO.} A tired American electorate could select a candidate hostile to the Republic or an overeager Johnson administration could sell out the South Vietnamese in the talks. Many South Vietnamese drew the same conclusion, and Ambassador Bunker characterized their initial reaction to the speech as “confused and fearful.” Although they appreciated the speech as a move to assuage foreign and domestic opinion, they recognized as never before that one day South Vietnam would be on its own.\footnote{Bunker quoted in \textit{The Bunker Papers}, vol. 2, 403-404, 426.}

Immediately after the speech, Thieu and his advisers concluded that perhaps only U.S. troop reductions could defuse the American domestic situation and add time to the clock. To buoy American and world opinion as well as inspire South Vietnamese confidence, Thieu proposed to General Westmoreland that the United States remove some of its troops with the prospect of future withdrawals as the military situation improved. On April 3rd, Thieu informed his country, “I have said many times that if the Allies cannot
continue their assistance, we will fight on alone…with the increase in our troop strength, with the plan for general mobilization, if the U.S. Government deems it necessary, a partial withdrawal of U.S. troops could begin late in 1968.” Similarly, his defense minister, Nguyen Van Vy, told reporters that month that the planned mobilization of an additional 135,000 men would allow foreign allies to begin a gradual reduction of their forces in South Vietnam. Indeed, in anticipation of American political necessity, South Vietnam was moving towards the total mobilization of its manpower so that it could defend itself from North Vietnam and allow U.S. reductions. Assessing the situation in Saigon, British diplomats noted, Thieu “would never ask the Americans to leave” but that he was improving South Vietnamese strength to “allow the U.S. to start cutting down its troop strength if it wished.” America’s faltering will had left the South Vietnamese fearful of abandonment and willing not just to accept, but propose, de-Americanization in 1968 as a means of staunching their ally’s domestic pressure to end the war.252

Thieu had mixed success selling this program to U.S. policymakers, though. The Defense Department had already begun updating their ARVN improvement and modernization plans, but only Paul Warnke, Clark Clifford, and General Creighton Abrams considered coupling them to American withdrawals. Warnke and Clifford were isolated voices in Washington, and rebuffed by Johnson. Abrams, on the other hand, as the new MACV commander strongly believed the South Vietnamese could assume the burden of their own defense. He worked with Ambassador Bunker and Thieu on strengthening

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ARVN forces while pacifying the countryside. Abrams explained to his subordinates, “You’ve got to face it—the Vietnamese have been given the lowest priority of anybody that’s fighting in this country! And that’s what we’re trying to correct.” All three men recognized the proximity of U.S. reductions, whether by settlement or by domestic necessity, and prepared for this eventuality. Both Abrams and Thieu independently told LBJ that he could soon begin removing soldiers. Meeting Johnson at Honolulu in mid-July, Thieu requested he put de-Americanization in a joint communique. Yet, President Johnson judged that “with heavy fighting in prospect and no evidence that the other side was prepared to engage in serious substantive negotiations,” any unilateral withdrawal would only encourage Hanoi to rebuff negotiations. U.S. leaders also ignored, Thieu’s “Plan 6” ARVN improvement scheme that, while more expensive than American plans, would have met South Vietnamese soldiers’ basic needs and created a large, mobile tactical force. Hence, the South Vietnamese delegation left thinking that Johnson had rejected their “long haul, low cost option” of de-Americanization with Vietnamese strength in favor of an uncertain quick end via a negotiated settlement.²⁵³

With allied troops routing the Communists after Tet and ARVN forces steadily improving, Thieu thought South Vietnam would win without a negotiated settlement. The first two Tet offensives had forfeited Communist control of the countryside and crippled the NLF. Thieu’s June 19 general mobilization bill greatly increased South Vietnam’s manpower in order to consolidate these gains and build a force capable of defending the

country alone. Hanoi certainly saw the mobilization as a real threat and authorized the third 1968 offensive to disrupt it. Rather than feeling post-Tet gloom, Thieu was confident his nation had turned a corner.²⁵⁴

Thieu believed he needed only time and American weapons and aid to prosecute the war to victory. He argued that de-Americanization (as well as peace talks) would prolong U.S. stamina and improve the Republic’s image abroad. Though willing to accept troop reductions, Thieu made clear that he would not accept a complete bombing halt without reciprocal North Vietnamese de-escalation on the ground. Infiltration or at least the constant shelling of South Vietnamese cities, which had killed hundreds of civilians since meetings began in Paris, had to stop as a precondition to meaningful talks. Nor would South Vietnam accept a coalition government or recognize the NLF. Yet, the South Vietnamese sensed Americans were seeking a negotiated settlement to disengage from Vietnam with little concern for the outcome. The Republican and Democratic conventions’ strong Vietnam planks bolstered the credibility of America’s commitment, but after Tet, the South Vietnamese doubted U.S. resolve. By mid-1968 then, Thieu had adopted a “talk and fight strategy” that advanced de-Americanization to prolong U.S. support and preserve the Republic of Vietnam. Thieu would use his limited power to save his country even if it meant meddling in the U.S. presidential election. Emboldened by the enemy’s attacks and American unpredictability, Saigon ramped up its war efforts to achieve victory before U.S. support ran out.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ Prados, “The Shape of the Table,” 356; and Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 121-122.
²⁵⁵ Duc, Saigon’s Side, 32, 54; Prados, “The Shape of the Table,” 356, 360-361; Pike, ed., The Bunker Papers, 534, 563; and minutes, R. Eugene Livesay, 7/1/1968, #33, folder “Minutes of SoD Staff Meetings, March-September,” Box 18, CCP, LBJPL.
Canberra: Regional Insecurity

After Tet and the year’s social and political uncertainty, American allies believed they had reason to fear the curtailment of U.S. obligations worldwide. Australian policymakers extrapolated U.S. de-escalation in Vietnam to other regional commitments. Should rising unrest and isolationism force U.S. leaders to abandon Vietnam then Australia’s entire national security structure of regional defense and great power protection would be suspect. Discussions in Australia’s capital Canberra placed these developments in the future, but their nascent fears framed the context in which they interpreted the direction of U.S foreign policy.

After the Second World War, Australian leaders formulated a strategy of “national defense through collective security” that served Australian interests by cooperating with a larger ally. As a mid-level power, Australia needed a great power protector to finance and support its defense interests in Asia as well as the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Great Britain served this role well in the 1940s and 1950s, but as it gradually diminished its presence east of the Suez Canal, Australia increasingly looked to the United States to provide this “security blanket.” The 1951 Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) guaranteed Australia’s continental security in the event of an overt attack, but Canberra wanted to keep any perceived threat far from its shores.256

Other collective security arrangements like the 1954 Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) tied British and American interests and commitments to regions

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Australia considered vital to its national security. The majority of Australian officials subscribed to the domino theory and believed Communist China was instigating and backing insurgencies throughout Southeast Asia. A vigorous policy of “forward defense” would have Australia intervene with great power support to stabilize these areas before the dominos could fall, pushing the threat closer to Australian shores. Canberra did not fear an immediate, direct threat from the likes of Communist China but believed that by steadily expanding its influence and control, Communists would undermine regional allies and seize key geostrategic points. Eventually they would have the facilities and power to threaten critical lines of communication and encircle the Australian continent, making a direct attack possible. A strategy of forward defense backed by great power commitments and credibility as contained in collective security agreements would insure the Communist menace remained far away from Australia.257

Australian officials interpreted Vietnam in this strategic context. They argued the SEATO treaty mandated assistance to South Vietnam and that failure there would weaken the whole system of collective security and move the front closer to Australia. Hence, Australia began committing advisors in 1962, and their troops invariably and increasingly fought in Vietnamese skirmishes before the war’s Americanization in 1965. Thereafter, Australian leaders remained deeply committed to South Vietnam, deploying around 8,000 soldiers there at the war’s peak. Australia financed its own war effort and refused to accept U.S. payments for its services. Canberra also thought that if they failed to help America defend Southeast Asia, then U.S. policymakers might not honor the ANZUS treaty. Even

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in 1968, the Cabinet Ministers held that their nation’s contribution “was a necessary quid pro quo for the United States’ commitment to Australia’s security under ANZUS.”

In short, Australia fought in Vietnam because its entire strategy of collective security and forward defense depended on it, and Australian officials urged their American counterparts to stand firm in Vietnam “come hell or high water.”

Nineteen sixty-eight saw the greatest postwar challenge to Australian grand strategy. In January, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced his government’s decision to remove its remaining forces east of the Suez Canal by 1971. Although Australian officials had long predicted British withdrawal as inevitable, they interpreted this move as Britain’s final abandonment of the land down under. More than ever, officials in Canberra “regarded the American alliance as of crucial importance.” Australian policies and deployments would have to command U.S. respect and loyalty in order to insure an ongoing American obligation to regional and Australian defense. With Tet rattling American nerves, Australians worried that they could soon lose their other great power protector. Britain’s retreat from Asia and the possibility of American withdrawals from Vietnam disturbed Australian analysts. After Tet, they began reformulating their

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258 Letter, December 1968, Item 1725814 Strategic Basis of Australian Defence Policy, A1838, NAA.


strategic calculus based on the uncertainty of U.S. commitments with the objective of keeping America involved in Southeast Asian defense.\textsuperscript{261}

Australia’s new Prime Minister, John Gorton, faced his own domestic challenges as Australian support for the war began to wane, but American developments troubled him far more. On February 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Gorton set what would become a permanent troop cap at around eight thousand men, later explaining to U.S. officials that any increase would create political problems. Meanwhile, Gorton was left guessing as to American intentions. The Johnson administration did not consult Gorton on its decision to start peace talks and limit bombing over North Vietnam. Gorton only belatedly received an official copy of LBJ’s March 31 speech and had already gleaned pieces of it from the press. Irritated, Gorton let Secretary of State Dean Rusk know how he felt at their April meeting. Although Rusk believed he had “smoothed out any ruffled feathers,” Gorton’s gnawing doubts of American forthrightness and commitment remained. Americans were growing tired of the burden of war and perhaps the responsibility of international leadership.\textsuperscript{262}

Prime Minister Gorton traveled to Washington in late May to size up the situation in America. As Johnson’s foreign policy advisor Walt Rostow noted, Gorton was concerned about a U.S. retreat from Asia, Vietnam developments, and the British withdrawal from Asia. American officials would need to assuage and calm his fears “that

\textsuperscript{261} Peter Edwards, \textit{A Nation at War: Australian Politics, Society, and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War, 1965-1975} (St. Leonards, New South Wales Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 190-194; and Cabinet Minute, Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, 1/25/1968, Item 3065382 Implications for Australia of the British Defence Decisions-January 1968-Decision 12, A5867, NAA.

the U.S. is about to retreat from Asia.” Secretary Rusk, who had met with Gorton in April, believed Johnson’s March speech had so “shaken” the Prime Minister that unless they convinced him that isolationism was not returning, Australia may abandon its “forward defense” strategy and retreat from Southeast Asia. British diplomats similarly concluded Gorton’s trip was to ascertain whether America was abandoning Vietnam by caving in to isolationism and the peace activists. As the logic went, the peace movement would force America to cut and run from Indochina, abandoning South Vietnam, whereas isolationism would curtail all U.S. global commitments.\(^{263}\)

During the visit, President Johnson reassured Gorton that America was not abandoning South Vietnam, much less Asia, while Secretary of Defense Clifford implored the Prime Minister to maintain Australia’s forces in Southeast Asia. Any apparent reduction would have an “exceedingly important” impact on American opinion and make it more difficult for policymakers to justify maintaining or expanding regional commitments. Clifford reasoned, “They would ask, if Southeast Asia is not important to our allies, why should it be to us?” Failing to see the double standard, Clifford informed Gorton that America would “gradually phase-down its military activities as the South Vietnamese increase their own role.” Johnson and Clifford encouraged Australia to take on a larger role in Southeast Asia, especially as Britain’s retracted, to secure the area and provide an encouraging example to wavering Americans. Given the uncertainty in the American electorate and the fact that they might eschew foreign commitments without

allied “symbolic support,” the administration’s words were at best temporary comfort for Gorton. Upon visiting Saigon in June, Gorton characterized South Vietnamese leaders as deeply uncertain and anxious about American “steadfastness and resolve;” the same could still be said of the Prime Minister and his strategists.264

Canberra’s perception was that America’s domestic travails would undermine support for a robust, internationalist foreign policy and so jeopardize not only the allied cause in Vietnam but also the whole structure of Australian grand strategy. As late as November 1967, Australian analysts reasonably concluded “that in spite of all the internal and international pressures upon it, the United States will not destroy the credibility of its commitment in Asia by conceding victory to North Vietnam in any guise.”265 By mid-1968, these same policymakers no longer assumed America would persevere in South Vietnam or maintain its forces in areas Australia considered vital to its interests. They now considered the likelihood of South Vietnam’s fall to Communism.

Like the Prime Minister, Australian analysts interpreted Johnson’s March 31 speech as a watershed. U.S. attitudes toward its global role were changing, and they concluded the speech had placed “a ceiling on its military commitment in Vietnam.” Further escalation or Americanization of the war seemed unlikely even if Hanoi refused to settle. Instead, the Johnson administration was seeking a “contracting involvement in Vietnam.” Australians correctly anticipated the administration’s emphasis on building up


265 Memo, Joint Intelligence Committee, “International Developments Up to 1970 and Their Implications for Australia”, November 1967, Item 6920799 International Developments up to 1977 and their implications for Australia—the threat to Australia and her Territories, A7942, NAA.
ARVN forces and predicted a phased U.S. withdrawal would only begin after a settlement as they doubted the Vietnamese could completely replace American units. Yet, Australian policymakers held that after Tet, the “prospects for an outright military victory by the communists have now virtually vanished,” though they expected a “long drawn-out struggle.” Australia’s man in Saigon, R.L. Harry, also believed the military and political situation in South Vietnam had greatly improved because of the Tet Offensive and Thieu’s policies. He argued allied troops could restrain the North Vietnamese and preserve the non-communist South as long as Australia and the United States continued their effort there and showed a willingness to maintain deterrent forces there after both sides concluded a settlement. Of course despite all the gains and optimism, as Defence Minister Allen Fairhall wondered aloud to Secretary Clifford, “The real question is whether the American people will be willing to go on supporting the war with no immediate prospect of its ending.” Prospects were good in South Vietnam, less so in the United States.²⁶⁶

Australian policymakers appreciated the fact that U.S. leaders needed a settlement soon to staunch America’s growing polarization and prevent a domestic disaster and a precipitous withdrawal from Vietnam. They worried Vietnam was aggravating America’s economic and racial problems, turning attention inward. Continuing the war might help South Vietnam consolidate its political power and territory, but an ongoing stalemate threatened disorder and a crippling of willpower in the United States. Their worst-case

contingency scenarios posited that domestic circumstances would force America to abandon Vietnam to the Communists. Analysts believed the dominoes would continue to fall thereafter. They noted, “In the absence of United States forces, the North Vietnamese have the military capacity readily to overrun Laos and Cambodia.” Canberra indeed believed Hanoi intended to conquer Indochina, overtly in Laos but probably covertly through Communist insurgencies elsewhere. Critically, should the Vietnam War end poorly and Washington allowed Thailand to fall as well, America’s global credibility would be forfeited. They also feared the loss of South Vietnam would facilitate the spread of Chinese influence and could pose a direct threat to Australian security if Vietnam gave China access to military facilities there. More worrisome still was the prospect of an American retreat from Asia.267

What had been the cardinal assumption of Australian strategy for years—an ongoing U.S. military presence in Asia, particularly Southeast Asia—was in the wake of President Johnson’s speech questionable. Looking back, top Australian policymakers agreed that the assumption about a continuing U.S. presence had been “made too cursorily” in the past. Policymakers argued that those responsible for Australia’s long-term threat assessment now had to define what constituted a U.S. presence in Asia and begin assuming

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that there would not be American soldiers on the Southeast Asian mainland after 1972. In July, the Defence Committee noted, “Clearly the United States’ internal economic and racial problems must influence its foreign policy but the results may not become immediately evident.” For most, the general trend appeared to be one of introspection and disengagement. In assessing future American attitudes, one memo held, “There seems to be no question of returning to ‘isolationism’” with an accompanying dangerous reduction in U.S. responsibilities. All agreed that the war was creating domestic problems that would necessitate a diminished military presence worldwide. But while some feared a global retreat, other observers countered that their peers exaggerated the forecasts for isolationism and instead expected a necessary strategic retrenchment.268

These Australian officials believed American leaders were reviewing the containment strategy and predicted U.S. policy would increasingly emphasize local responsibility and regional defense over American intervention. Again, American frustration in Vietnam and trouble at home was to blame. Moral imperatives, like saving the South Vietnamese from Communist terrorism or invasion, would no longer rally public support. Instead, Australian officials noted, “The morally acceptable course is becoming to help those who help themselves abroad, and to put ones [sic] own house in order at home.” Although U.S. interests would prevent an abject return to isolationism, they

recognized, “Strong domestic pressures can be expected to reduce the US overseas forces to a minimum.” Regardless of who won the American presidential election in November, U.S. foreign policy would emphasize “self-help.” Settling the Vietnam War or at least reducing the number of American soldiers in Vietnam would reduce this pressure, but withdrawals from Asia and Europe seemed certain as from now on America would only do its “fair share” in world and regional defense. Australian leaders would have to study the U.S. domestic situation, gauge the direction of American foreign policy, and do whatever necessary to ensure “a continuing effective U.S. presence in South East Asia.”

To achieve this end, Australian officials advised continuing the forward defense strategy while taking steps to encourage Americans to maintain their troops in Asia. South Vietnam’s survival was critical to this goal as its fall would besmirch American credibility, further strain domestic support for an internationalist foreign policy, and threaten the region as a whole. These strategists made clear,

Australia’s interest is that every effort be made: to preserve and consolidate a viable political opposition to Hanoi in South Vietnam and to develop supporting military capacity there; to discourage and control Hanoi’s ambitions in Cambodia and Laos…; to ensure that the United States’ withdrawal and its policy of self-help in respect of insurgency do not weaken confidence in its commitments to Thailand, and undermine its deterrent against North Vietnamese military attack.

Australia would have to continue its war in Vietnam to strengthen South Vietnam and encourage Americans to stay the course. Australia would also have to use its resources,


primarily economic and political, to stop regional insurgencies while using its influence and diplomacy to recruit other nations in these counter-insurgency efforts. At every opportunity, Canberra would have to show itself worthy of upholding its commitments, leading by example to hearten its great power protector to persevere.²⁷¹

Australia’s objective was to stop the first domino from falling, whether that was South Vietnam or American will. With growing success in South Vietnam, Australians increasingly felt the battle had shifted to the United States. An American retreat could threaten all of its Pacific pledges and ultimately Australian grand strategy. Across a different ocean, British policymakers were having similar thoughts.

**London: U.S. Isolationism, Congress, & Western Insecurity**

British security was not immune to concerns over the Vietnam War. As policymakers in London appreciated, the Southeast Asian conflict was precipitating a whole host of domestic problems that threatened the postwar order of international relations. In darker moments, they feared frustration over Vietnam would catalyze a shift in public attitudes toward isolationism. More importantly, the ongoing war and associated budget problems added heft to congressional critics trying to reduce the number of U.S. soldiers overseas, especially those serving in Europe as a part of NATO forces. Whitehall considered this presence a vital deterrent to Soviet aggression against Western Europe. Should events in Vietnam cause a domestic crisis in America, British security and strategy could be undermined. In short, Britain’s global interests in Southeast Asia, America, and Europe illuminate the connections between U.S. domestic and foreign policies and their

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effects on the wider world. Additionally, these discussions highlight the subtle evolution of British views on Vietnam. As the United States pursued negotiations and de-escalated the war, Britons increasingly backed U.S. aims in Indochina, especially as they began to fear that a precipitate withdrawal from Vietnam would have a calamitous effect on American foreign policy and internationalism.

Of course, Europeans had worried at the onset of America’s Vietnam War that the conflict would cause these very problems. Europeans did not see the Republic of Vietnam’s survival as crucial to Western security and worried American credibility would suffer if it fell. European leaders rightly predicted that the Asian war would drain American manpower from Europe. The U.S. Army in Europe became a manpower reserve pool with low morale, inferior units, and delays in receiving newer armaments. Aggravated by Soviet improvements and the loss of French participation in NATO, the credibility of the American deterrent in Europe had decreased substantially since the early 1960s. By 1967, America’s NATO allies were voicing their concerns over neglect due to the Vietnam War. In March 1968, William Bundy noted the “strong sentiment in Europe that the stakes in Vietnam or even in Southeast Asia are not worth a tremendous expenditure of US effort—and that such an effort may operate over time to dilute US support for its commitments in Europe.” Yet, European policymakers increasingly worried that humiliation in Vietnam would cause the American people and Congress to shirk other U.S. commitments worldwide.272

Great Britain itself had a complicated history with Vietnam. During and after World War II, Britain sent military and diplomatic aid to France in support of its colonial ventures. British diplomats tried to enlist American help in maintaining French rule in Indochina but only succeeded as the First Indochina War became a Cold War battleground. Yet as French control deteriorated in the 1950s, Prime Minister Winston Churchill refused to intervene, and Great Britain co-chaired the 1954 Geneva Conference that partitioned Vietnam. During the early Kennedy years, British officials abandoned their role as peacemakers and encouraged JFK to increase the military aid and advisers going to South Vietnam while they themselves sent their own counter-insurgency experts to Saigon.\footnote{Lawrence, \textit{Assuming the Burden}, 33-37, 233-236; and Peter Busch, \textit{All the Way with JFK? Britain, America, and the Vietnam War} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7, 9, 199.}

As optimism faded in 1963, Whitehall concluded South Vietnamese military victory was impossible without confronting Hanoi’s patrons, the Soviet Union and China, directly. Labour won the October 1964 election with a slim majority, and their government faced an ongoing financial, balance-of-payments crisis made worse by their Asian commitments.\footnote{That is, foreign spending (imports as well as foreign aid and commitments) exceeded trade and income, producing a balance-of-payments deficit. Consistent outlays of pounds then threatened the currency’s credibility and value, which created other budgetary and economic problems.} Prime Minister Harold Wilson quietly urged President Johnson against intervention and resisted constant U.S. pressure for Britain to commit troops to Vietnam. While LBJ wanted Wilson to do more to support his actions in Vietnam, Wilson’s party wanted him to condemn Johnson’s policies. Wilson balanced these domestic and international forces, refusing to condone America’s bombing of North Vietnam but giving general support to U.S. aims while launching peace initiatives to end the war through...
negotiations. Meanwhile, the pound’s devaluation in late 1967 coupled with rising anti-
colonial sentiment at home and abroad led to Wilson’s decision to retreat from Britain’s
foreign commitments east of Suez in January 1968. With Britain leaving Asia, its regional
allies looked to America to fill this gap. Vietnam was the test of U.S. resolve.275

As Johnson stood firm there, Prime Minister Wilson saw his role as a world
peacemaker. In February, Wilson advised President Johnson against retaliating against
Hanoi and escalating the war while heralding the San Antonio formula for mutual
withdrawal as the way towards peace. Wilson also suggested Johnson stop the bombing to
test North Vietnamese sincerity. In a moment of self-adulation, Wilson told the American
ambassador, “We have been trying to prevent escalation in order that the voice of reason,
and the cool voice of those who want them round the conference table could be heard.”
Nevertheless, Wilson’s interest was not entirely self-serving; British policymakers
assessed Tet and the American response as having global repercussions, affecting even the
political climate and degree of student unrest in Great Britain.276

Tet encouraged student radicals worldwide, and British diplomats tried to anticipate
U.S. policy in part to minimize their own domestic problems. After Tet, radical British
student activist and leader Tariq Ali rallied his fellow protestors, declaring, “We shall fight,
we will win: Paris, London, Rome, Berlin!” On March 17, an antiwar protest in London’s

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275 Logevall, Choosing War, 16-18; Sylvia Ellis, Britain, America, and the Vietnam War (Westport,
CT: Praeger, 2004), 248-249, 252, 267-269; and Rhiannon Vickers, “Harold Wilson, the British Labour
276 Chester L. Cooper, In the Shadows of History: Fifty Years Behind the Scenes of Cold War
Diplomacy (New York: Prometheus Boos, 2005), 258; Harold Wilson, A Personal Record: The Labour
United Kingdom, NSF, LBJPL.
Grosvenor Square with somewhere between 15,000 and 30,000 participants turned bloody as they attacked the American embassy. Officials begged their U.S. counterparts to keep them apprised of any policy changes, especially if they decided to send troops into Laos to shore up the situation in South Vietnam. They worried expanding and escalating the war would increase criticism of Wilson on the left and incite more antiwar protests. Johnson’s March 31 speech provided a temporary balm to this unrest. American observers concluded LBJ’s peace overtures had “substantially improved the British political climate and has generally reduced much of the tension in the British political debate on Vietnam.” Though a palliative to British and U.S. opinion, America’s evolving policies failed to soothe Whitehall.277

Britons recognized that invariably, Vietnam and U.S. politics affected one another. Britain’s ambassador in Washington, Patrick Dean captured this complexity in an early 1968 dispatch. He wrote,

In reporting on Vietnam…it will no longer always be possible to report what we learn of the Administration’s intentions simply within the Vietnam context; it will no longer be possible to report developments on the domestic scene without regard to the effect they may have on actual Vietnam policies. This [domestic political] struggle is bound itself to have some effect on the fundamental policy decisions of the Administration.

Dean trusted that President Johnson would continue to make sound policy decisions but would have to present them in such a way as “to ensure that points are gained, or at least

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not lost, in the electoral battle.” With both the Vietnam War and the presidential race heating up, a significant development in either could decide the outcome of the other.\textsuperscript{278}

Whitehall saw the beginning of Paris talks and the upcoming U.S. presidential election as a turning point, but political posturing and obfuscation made it difficult for analysts to discern the direction of American policies in Vietnam. As one memo put it, “We cannot predict with any confidence what road the Americans will take in 1969 and after….But the events of the latter half of 1968 could determine United States policy for a long time to come.” They acknowledged the United States could not continue the war at its present level without destroying American society, creating a U.S. balance-of-payments crisis capable of crippling the world monetary system, straining foreign relations with Communists and neutral nations, and further weakening NATO.\textsuperscript{279}

Indeed, the United States had suffered a gold crisis in March 1968 similar to what Great Britain experienced in 1967 as people, doubting the nation could sustain such large balance-of-payment deficits, exchanged their dollars for gold. This monetary crisis brought home the reality to U.S. taxpayers, businesses, legislators, and policymakers that the Vietnam War and aggressive Cold War containment came with real costs. De-escalation in Vietnam and retrenchment abroad, including NATO reductions, seemed necessary to prevent future monetary crises and budget difficulties. Britons sympathized

\textsuperscript{278} Pat Dean, “Vietnam and the American Election,” 3/26/1968, FCO 7/746, PRO.

with America’s plight and so urged Johnson to pursue negotiations and enact an unconditional bombing halt.\footnote{280}

Great Britain did not want America to abandon South Vietnam, though. If the Republic of Vietnam fell, it became likely (though not certain) that other dominos would fall. Whitehall assumed “there would be a partial or total U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam” but argued a complete and precipitous exit from Vietnam and Southeast Asia would jeopardize Asian stability, harm British economic and security interests, and destroy confidence in U.S. alliances worldwide. London officials realized they had little influence on American policies, though. Should domestic circumstances appear to be forcing a large American withdrawal from the region, Britain could try to build up other Southeast Asian nations against insurgency in the hopes of encouraging the Americans to stay. With so much uncertainty, though, officials concluded, “Our main interest lies in keeping silent until we can see what the outcome in Viet-Nam is to be.”\footnote{281}

Britons also believed that Americans could not confine the Vietnam War’s political and strategic consequences to Indochina. Humiliating defeat in Vietnam would impugn America’s global credibility, but all agreed that outcome was unlikely in 1968. More pressing for American and British planners was Vietnam’s immediate effect on American internationalism. They feared setbacks there raised the specter of isolationism and unshackled congressional bogeymen to criticize and endanger U.S. foreign commitments.


and deployments. For policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic, the postwar internationalist order appeared increasingly fragile.

Ever attuned to U.S. developments, Patrick Dean cabled his growing concerns over “neo-isolationism” back to London. Americans were turning inward, and Dean argued “that not since the 1860’s has the questioning of most of the basic tenets ever been so widespread and profound in American history.” Due to race riots, student unrest, assassinations, balance-of-payments deficits, budget problems, and frustration with the Vietnam War, liberals as well as conservatives increasingly wanted to reduce foreign entanglements. Vietnam awakened Americans to the cold reality that an abundance of idealism and resources could not fix all the world’s problems. The United States could not retreat completely but the domestic context would reduce its activity abroad. Although presidential candidates Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey believed in internationalism, whoever won would “be severely inhibited by the present mood of the country.” Dean predicted the present Congress would step up its efforts to reduce the number of U.S. soldiers in Europe while curtailing other commitments abroad; he feared the next Congress would be even worse. Dean concluded that barring “some dramatic change in the international scene the United States Government is likely in the coming years to try to reduce, and wherever possible shed its existing commitments on the ground in Europe and elsewhere and that it will be extremely reluctant to undertake any fresh commitments anywhere for a long time.”

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282 Dispatch, Pat Dean, “Neo-Isolationism,” 7/16/1968, FCO 7/778, PRO; and report, Pat Dean to Mr. Stewart, “United States and British Foreign Policy,” 7/31/1968, FCO 7/778, PRO.
Frustration in Vietnam and this formative isolationism added political heft to members of Congress already wanting to curtail existing commitments for economic reasons. Since 1966, Senator Mike Mansfield had been proposing a resolution that dictated a substantial reduction in the number of American troops stationed in Europe. Mansfield contended they were an expensive luxury, unnecessary to American credibility and the NATO commitment. In 1968, Senator Stuart Symington added his own amendment to cap appropriations for no more than 50,000 troops to deal with the balance-of-payments deficit and so strengthen the dollar. The Mansfield Resolution and Symington Amendment were symptoms of the changing domestic mood. They were also part of a revival in congressional oversight of presidential foreign policy. Historian Robert David Johnson noted, “By the middle of 1968, a majority of Senate Democrats and a growing number of GOP senators, while not willing to advocate withdrawal from Vietnam, were sufficiently radicalized by the war to reverse their previous support for a weak legislative role in international affairs.” Congress not only challenged executive prerogative; by harnessing public sentiment that felt presidents were wasting men and money abroad in unnecessary commitments, they could threaten U.S. alliances and deterrent credibility.

As evident in Patrick Dean’s aforementioned dispatches, U.S. and European leaders feared public isolationism and a recalcitrant Congress would undermine NATO and they believed Vietnam complicated these trends. Walt Rostow worried the Tet Offensive might produce “strong political forces” that could force America to “pull troops out of Europe.”

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283 In 1968, there were approximately 200,000 U.S. Army troops in Europe.
284 Robert David Johnson, Congress and the Cold War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 142-143.
Rostow continued, “We don’t want a Berlin or NATO crisis.” As Western Germany’s Minister of Defense informed his U.S. counterpart, “The question of U.S. forces in Europe cannot be considered without also considering Vietnam.” Positively resolving the latter would ease domestic pressure for a global retreat.285

Unable to conclude the Vietnam War, the Johnson administration recognized this problem and tried to head the Senate off. President Johnson was firm, “I don’t intend to let NATO fall apart. I won’t draw back any combat troops.” But Clark Clifford and his advisors believed reductions were unavoidable, and he emphasized they had to draw up and propose a plan before Congress mandated a reduction. Should Congress act first, it “would have the gravest consequences for the security and stability of the NATO Alliance, and would wreak havoc with U.S. policies and goals in related areas.” Europe would be demoralized and perhaps find security in Cold War neutralism. Although the State Department wanted to delay any decision until the next administration assumed office, Clifford growled, “Tell State we must cut or we’ll have [the] Symington Amendment.” Clifford’s team hoped a 100,000 reduction in troops by 1971 would satisfy Congress without destroying NATO.286

As protesters rioted outside the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Soviet tanks were rolling through Czechoslovakia, temporarily halting the reduction proposals. Though behind the Iron Curtain, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a modicum of freedom in the mid-sixties.

285 Memorandum for the record, Walt Rostow, 2/29/1968, FRUS, 1964-1968, 6:279-281; memo, 7/24/1968, #1, folder “Memoranda of Conversation,” Box 7, CCP, LBJPL; and see also “Notes on the Meeting Held with Mr. Clark Clifford in Brussels on Friday, 10th May at 0730,” DEF 24/668, PRO.

286 Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 6/26/1968, #35, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; memo, 7/11/1968, #3g, folder “Force Improvements for NATO (29 Feb.-20 Oct.)” [1],” Box 21, CCP, LBJPL; and memo, Warnke to Clifford, n.d., #16, folder “Troops in Europe and Balance of Payments,” Box 17, CCP, LBJPL.
Prague became the center of a vibrant youth counterculture. Under new Party leadership in 1968, Czechs also enjoyed a brief flirtation with democracy and openness—the Prague Spring—before Warsaw Pact forces ended the affair in late August. Cameras captured the invasion as well as how unwelcome the Soviets were in Czechoslovakia. Finding outlets in the Western media, these images reminded the public and politicians alike of Cold War realities, if only for a time.287

The Soviet invasion averted congressional cuts in 1968, but domestic and foreign observers recognized economic and other parochial concerns would soon revive calls for European reductions. The Johnson administration’s lonely advocate of de-Americanization in Vietnam, Paul Warnke, sensibly argued that the invasion had not increased the threat to NATO. Instead, it revealed that the Communist bloc suffered internal disarray, lessening the actual threat to Western Europe. Thus, America should continue the withdrawal plans while seizing the moment to press Europe to do more. Yet, Clifford and the State Department continued to fear a European drawdown, especially now, would create doubts that NATO could defend Europe from Soviet aggression. Or as Western German Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger put it to Clifford, “Germany’s best protection are [sic] the U.S. troops on Germany’s own soil. It is they who make the aggressor think twice.” Regardless, all agreed U.S. domestic circumstances would force some reduction.288

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Assessing British grand strategy for the 1970s, Whitehall noted that the Czech crisis had muted American cries for a drawdown of troops in Europe but contended they would soon resume and likely prove irresistible. British defense officials believed NATO was far stronger than it had been in the past but held that nothing matched the deterrent credibility (or psychological security) of American soldiers stationed in Europe. In the 1960s, NATO adopted the tenets of flexible response, trusting that sizable Western armies along with superior nuclear capabilities would deter Soviet aggression or at least minimize the risk of a nuclear conflagration. Reducing the number of U.S. troops eroded this deterrent strength, and Europeans feared that the United States was replacing flexible response with a more cost-effective, trip-wire nuclear strategy in which any Soviet provocation against the West would precipitate nuclear war. With Americans looking increasingly inward, European leaders wondered whether the United States would choose nuclear war to defend Europe. Moreover, Congress appeared ready to trump executive privilege by dictating withdrawals. British analysts concluded European NATO members should begin planning for significant American reductions along with the possible removal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. Because of Vietnam, domestic unrest, economic travails, and a recalcitrant Congress, not even the dramatic Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia could stop America from reducing its international obligations.289

Noting Australia’s constant concern over America’s commitment to Asia, Patrick Dean wrote, “Indeed we all have some ground for worry about the future, given the continuing current of apparently quite strong ‘neo-isolationist’ feeling which seems to be

abroad.” President Johnson and both presidential candidates did not share this sentiment, but Dean believed one could see it keenly in the Senate’s calls for European reductions. From Hanoi to London, all understood South Vietnam was a domino leaning upon the American home front. Should one or both fall, so too could America’s pledges to its Asian and European partners. All had reason to worry. Their fates were at the mercy of events in Vietnam and the American electorate.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Dispatch, Pat Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 6/1/1968, FCO 7/742, PRO; and see also Trauschweizer, The Cold War U.S. Army, 114, 133, 187-189.
5. The ’68 Election:

De-Americanization & October Surprises, September-November, 1968

As the presidential campaign began, de-Americanization intersected with U.S. politics, the Johnson administration’s policies, and international intrigue. Behind closed doors, the debate over de-escalation or resumed bombing continued, just as President Johnson vacillated over whether or not to support his faltering Vice President. Yet, Johnson remained firm in his hostility towards any plan to reduce the number of American troops in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Humphrey dithered about whether or not to break with LBJ, first over an unconditional bombing halt, and then over reducing the number of American troops serving in Vietnam. Nixon had already accepted unilateral withdrawal. He needed only prevent his challenger from outflanking him on the issue and continue to stress law and order. Nixon’s election seemed surer than ever.

But in October, international circumstances and influence fed back into U.S. politics. The Tet Offensive had been a constant force in American politics that year, but with the November 5 election at hand, Hanoi intervened again to try and stop all bombing of their country. Saigon’s refusal to enter the Paris talks was their attempt to defend their national interests and elect their favored candidate, Richard Nixon. Once again in 1968, the foreign and the domestic proved inseparable.

The Democrats’ Dilemma & De-Americanization

As the final stretch of the campaign started, Democrats still lacked a political patron for de-Americanization much less party unity on any Vietnam policy. Whereas Republicans tried to maintain a united front, the Democratic Party found itself bitterly divided in 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 and the President’s heavy hand, the Democratic Party faced an uphill battle against the Republicans in 1968.

This was the electable Democrat’s dilemma. To break with the President and pledge to de-escalate the war gave the candidate a chance to win popular appeal but at the cost of LBJ’s support and those delegates critical to nomination. But to toe the Johnson line would allow the Republican challenger to run as the peace candidate, spelling certain defeat in November. As Democratic differences on negotiations and the bombing halt narrowed, the dilemma increasingly centered on de-Americanization. As matters came to a head in September, it came down to this decision—could Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate, break with LBJ and announce a program of phased unilateral withdrawal while the White House denied the possibility or planning for such a contingency?

From the beginning, party politics and the war beset Hubert Humphrey’s candidacy. After Johnson bowed out of the race, Vice President 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 a negotiated settlement in Vietnam,  

291 Interview on From the People, folder “Speeches- Feb. 1968-From the People,” Box A17, LP, GFL.
the vice president fell completely out of favor with the president. 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. Afterwards he belatedly began moving towards a dovish position.

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, Eugene 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 Front.” The administration condemned the plank. General Abrams believed it would have “emasculated” the military’s position in South Vietnam and that its very support gave Hanoi “substantial negotiating material.” Even dovish Clifford argued the plank would hurt allied diplomacy, possibly endanger soldiers’ lives, and encourage North Vietnam to prolong the war. 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

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292 Logevall, Choosing War, 314, 331, 394.
293 LaFeber, The Deadly Bet, 117, 121, 123-124.
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 his willingness to compromise, Humphrey 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 at the convention.294

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 hardened the party’s divisions. As adopted, the platform rejected any unilateral withdrawal of U.S. soldiers. Troop reductions remained predicated on the mutual withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces, a policy very different from the GOP’s de-Americanization platform. The Democratic platform did include support for accelerating the training and

294 Wainstock, *The Turning Point*, 128-132; Sorley, *Vietnam Chronicles*, 39; and draft memo, Clifford to LBJ, August 1968, #13, folder “Attitudes & Statements [1 of 2],” Box 102 #2, Country File—Vietnam, NSF, LBJPL.
buildup 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.  

After winning the nomination, Hubert Humphrey attempted to reunite the party, and the intransigence of party doves caused him to take tentative steps away from LBJ’s Vietnam policies. Since July, Humphrey had been privately urging Johnson to adopt a total bombing halt, but the President refused. With antiwar protests marring Humphrey’s campaign stops, only the candidate’s public, vocal call for an unconditional total bombing halt would show his independence, stop the heckling, and turn the momentum away from Nixon. Yet, such a move carried great risk as it threatened not only LBJ’s tacit support but might also cause the President to work against his candidacy. Put simply, Humphrey could break with Johnson and possibly win the election without presidential aid or back administration policies and lose the election. As a high-ranking official close to the campaign noted, “Maybe Hubert Humphrey’s situation is simply impossible. Maybe his dilemma on the war is just insoluble. Maybe he is bound to be nominated, but he can’t be elected.” To pollsters, journalists, political observers, and foreign diplomats, 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 administration’s stand against an unconditional bombing halt.

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On September 9, Humphrey made a fundamental change in his rhetoric on Vietnam that set off a firestorm in Washington. That day, 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.” It was the Democratic contender’s first mention that unilateral reductions were possible and a major break from the administration. The White House response and denials were immediate. The next day, President Johnson told a crowd in New Orleans, “No man can predict” when withdrawals could begin. Secretary of Defense Clifford confirmed to the news media and Congress that at present he did not know if withdrawals would be possible in 1969. Clifford declared, “We had no plan to reduce the number of troops in Vietnam at all” but would maintain the ceiling at 549,500 men until something precipitated a change. The administration’s contradictions of Humphrey’s prediction were truthful; de-Americanization and plans for U.S. withdrawals were nonexistent.297

Instead, the White House and the Defense Department continued their rancorous internal debate over the merits of negotiations and a bombing halt versus resumed and perhaps even more intense aerial bombing of North Vietnam. Clark Clifford continued to believe Americans were demanding an end to the war and that an unconditional bombing halt was essential to starting productive negotiations with Hanoi. Clifford constantly voiced these concerns to his staff, telling them in mid-September, “I think the President just doesn’t have any idea what’ll happen here at home if talks fail.” In the wake of

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Czechoslovakia, strategist Paul Nitze even speculated that Moscow might be directing Hanoi to sabotage the talks to spark “terribly serious upheavals here.” But these men remained divided on Vietnam as Clifford and the doves feared the backlash at home if peace efforts failed, and Nitze and the hawks worried more that any indication of a South Vietnamese sellout would have calamitous international effects. Clifford laid it out, “I’m for anything that will get the Pres. to stop the bombing!” Nitze countered, “No, I’m not!! Not if it means doing things contrary to our national interest! Wrecking NATO by playing footsie with [Soviet leader Alexei] Kosygin would do so!” Disentangling Vietnam, domestic matters, and broader foreign policy again proved impossible for the divided Johnson administration.298

In September, the hawks seemed on the verge of winning the argument. As Clifford tried to reason with LBJ, Walt Rostow was giving the President “contingency plans for applying more pressure to North Vietnam if you should judge diplomacy has failed.” These options included hitting Vietnamese bases in Cambodia, bombing up to the 20th parallel, targeting Hanoi and Haiphong along with mining the latter’s harbor, and even countenanced allied ground attacks in and north of the DMZ. American analysts also argued that the conditions in North Vietnam had improved due to bombing limitations, including better morale, trade, and reconstruction progress. Throughout September, President Johnson expressed his desire that Humphrey and the Democrats win their races and instructed the Cabinet to help his Vice President, but with LBJ vacillating between serious talks and military victory, a dramatic peace overture to Hanoi much less support

for Humphrey’s increasingly dovish stance was out of the question. Those around him noted Clifford was “so very, very gloomy” about the prospects of peace. Clifford lamented the hawks’ psychosis as a product of the “self-delusion that we always win—and yet nothing happens except [the war] goes on and on and on!” Indicating their pessimism and the likelihood the hawks would derail negotiations, Clifford’s team of doves candidly expressed their genuine concern; “The Greatest Fear of us all is the HARD LINE.” With administration doves doing their best to keep Washington engaged in negotiations, there was no room to consider de-Americanization.299

Despite the President’s chastening, Humphrey continued his cautious break from LBJ, giving the Nixon campaign cause for worry. After the Republican Convention, Nixon had resumed his strategy of vagueness on Vietnam. Since Johnson’s Democrats shut out the doves, Nixon could safely cater to moderates and run to Humphrey’s left by touting de-Americanization and pledging to “end the war.” Meanwhile, his appeals to law and order attracted more conservative voters without him having to outline a more militant policy in Vietnam. Humphrey’s speculation on troop reductions, especially those that would occur in the first months of his administration, threatened to overtake Nixon’s imprecise policy of de-Americanization. Around September 22, Humphrey told a TV audience, “I do think, and I can predict for myself, that it will be possible sometime in the future, to be able to have a systematic reduction of American forces in South Vietnam.” The next day,

Humphrey elaborated that should negotiations prove fruitless he would reassess the situation and move toward a policy that included troop reductions. With Humphrey adopting a form of de-Americanization, Nixon had to act before Humphrey outflanked him by announcing a specific timetable. Nixon authorized Representative Melvin Laird to lure the Johnson administration into vehemently denying any possibility of withdrawals in the foreseeable future.\(^{300}\)

Laird had long maintained that the GOP must run as the peace party to win the 1968 election, and ever the brilliant partisan, he worked to prevent or at least deny the political gains of Humphrey’s shift towards de-escalation. Laird learned that Humphrey was planning to build upon his prior statements by announcing 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. Laird charged, “There has been so much loose talk—dangerous, harmful talk—confusing and, in my view, irresponsible talk—by the Vice President about cutting our troop strength in Vietnam that it is time to set the record straight.” Denying Humphrey political credit for any withdrawals that could occur in 1969, Laird maintained that the proposed reduction “is—and has been—[the product of] ordinary and methodical military planning.” In other words, Humphrey was not promising anything new but was simply adopting LBJ’s unannounced yet

\(^{300}\) Republican National Committee, the Answer Desk #16, September 23, 1968, Series I Campaigns-1968-The Answer Desk, Box #2:16, the H.R. Haldeman Collection, RNLBF; Republican National Committee, the Answer Desk #17, September 24, 1968, Series I Campaigns-1968-The Answer Desk, Box #2:16, the H.R. Haldeman Collection, RNLBF; and Van Atta, With Honor, 131-132.
scheduled policy. But, Laird’s gambit had a second goal: elicit such a firm denial by the Johnson administration that Humphrey could not pledge withdrawals without breaking completely from the President.301

Laird’s scheme worked brilliantly as the Johnson administration repudiated Laird’s judgment, inadvertently heading off Humphrey. Rostow and LBJ immediately ordered Secretary of Defense Clifford to rebut Laird, “denying we’re going to cut troops in Vietnam.” On September 25, Clifford repudiated the charge that any such plans were in the works and countered that the number of U.S. troops in South Vietnam would continue to increase as established by prior war planning. Clifford reiterated, “We have not yet reached the level of 549,500 in South Vietnam. We intend to continue to build toward that level. We have no intention of lowering that level, either by next June or at any time in the foreseeable future.” Clifford continued the administration’s campaign against troop speculation on Meet the Press. He swore that the Defense Department had “no plans at this time for the return of any troops” as ongoing hostilities dictated an increase up to the cap. Clifford hoped that with ARVN improvements, America could begin withdrawing its soldiers but noted any prediction would be premature. Clifford cautioned, “Even when they begin to take over a greater share of the fighting, I contemplate that we would pull our troops back in a secondary position until we are absolutely certain that the local forces can take over the fighting. So as soon as we move a local regiment into a battle area, I don’t think we will bring our regiment back home; we will move them as support troops.”

short, South Vietnamese improvement would allow American forces to fall back to support positions; Washington would not necessarily redeploy them out of Vietnam. When asked about the possibility of U.S. reductions in 1969, Clifford replied, “Oh, no….There is no plan to do so, and I think it is a dis-service to the American people and our allies to suggest any specific date that we would bring them back when there is now no plan to do so.” By the time Clifford had finished, the administration had denounced reductions as militarily impossible into the foreseeable future and condemned those who would suggest a withdrawal timetable.302

Humphrey had been planning both, but with the administration refusing to countenance withdrawal, he could not announce he would begin reducing U.S. forces in Vietnam after his inauguration. The Laird flap coincided with the nadir of Humphrey’s campaign with the Gallup Poll showing 43 percent for Nixon and only 28 percent for Humphrey (21 percent backed American Independent Party candidate, George Wallace). With his campaign dead in the water, Humphrey chose to break with Johnson, and he began drafting a major Vietnam speech. Humphrey told his advisors, “We have to start pulling our ground forces out as soon as the Vietnamese are ready—de-Americanizing it,” but Clifford’s statements restricted his freedom. On September 30 in Salt Lake City, Humphrey announced he was willing to try an 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.

But Nixon and Laird’s gambit had worked. In effect, the administration had labeled anyone who set a date for initial withdrawals as foolish and reckless. Laird recalled, “And that stopped Humphrey. If Humphrey would have gone ahead with his plan, then Nixon wouldn’t have been president.” Humphrey publicly embraced de-escalation in Salt Lake City but did not announce a specific post-inaugural reduction. With Humphrey unable to announce planned troop withdrawals, both parties offered similar de-Americanization strategies to the electorate.

The Laird flap revealed much about 1968’s de-Americanization proposals. Policymakers and politicians alike consistently bound de-Americanization to domestic circumstances and political needs. Laird certainly thought so. Bringing American boys home was the politically astute thing to do. Laird held, “Humphrey could have won the election if he would have backed away from Johnson on Vietnam and gone through with his Pennsylvania speech to begin withdrawing some troops from Vietnam by the end of the year.”

Department of Defense officials agreed. No de-Americanization plans existed, but they believed Humphrey should accept a continued U.S. commitment to South Vietnam

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303 Humphrey quoted in Wainstock, The Turning Point, 161.
304 Wainstock, The Turning Point, 160-162; White, Making of the President, 412-416; and Mann, Grand Delusion, 618.
305 Interview with Laird by Tom Wells, 5/21/1986, folder “5/21/1986 Interview- Tom Wells/The War Within: America’s Battle over Vietnam,” Box D44, LP, GFL.
while announcing a specific timetable for American withdrawals. Humphrey should spin his de-Americanization as a “natural evolution” of Johnson’s policy, including ARVN improvement. The author noted, “This program is both possible and realistic….It is in effect good policy and good politics.” Moreover, Humphrey could offer the savings from a reduced Vietnam deployment to Congress for domestic needs. Given President Johnson’s instructions that the Cabinet help the Vice President’s campaign, de-Americanization was arguably the ideal political expedient. As LBJ considered the merits of victory versus negotiations, unilateral troop withdrawals remained far beyond the pale, though.308

Nixon and Laird’s scheme to outflank Humphrey proved the Johnson administration had no plans to de-Americanize the war. Secretary Clifford was telling the truth; the Pentagon and the White House had no plan or intention of reducing the number of Americans in Vietnam apart from a negotiated mutual withdrawal. All were hopeful about the South Vietnamese, but as Clifford privately acknowledged, “The ARVN is not ready to take over the defense of South Vietnam.” As Congress increasingly asked about reductions, JCS Chairman Earle Wheeler remained firm, “We won’t pull down—we are able to knock [rumors of withdrawals] down flatly.” Indeed, Laird instigated an internal review of Vietnam policies as the White House tried to determine where his information came from. In reality, Laird was citing working plans for reductions after a settlement, conveniently omitting that peace was a prerequisite. As the archival record makes clear, there were no redeployment plans yet in existence. Responding to Laird’s claim, one memo noted, “Until such time as the enemy takes some concrete steps to end the war, it

308 Memo, Freeman, c.10/3/1968, #4b, folder “Miscellaneous [1],” Box 15, CCP, LBJPL.
will be necessary to continue inflicting high attrition on his forces. Therefore, the retention of all U.S. combat troops in RVN will be necessary for the indefinite future.” Paul Warnke, who had proposed a draft de-Americanization policy that spring, confirmed that “at this time there is no approved plan for the method or time frame of a reduction of U.S. forces in Vietnam, nor is there an approved plan for shifting duty assignments of SVN and U.S. military units.” Nevertheless, per Johnson’s request, Clifford made a thorough inquiry of Pentagon and MACV officials to see if such a plan existed. None did. Clifford concluded, “Under all these circumstances, a reasonable assumption is that Representative Laird does not have any facts to support his position.” Of course, facts were unnecessary for political gamesmanship.\(^309\)

Seizing the opportunity, Nixon exploited LBJ’s and Humphrey’s difficulties with de-Americanization. Just as Humphrey was hinting at a reduction pledge, Nixon told radio listeners, “I certainly don’t want to pull the rug out from under our negotiators in Paris by indicating now that we are going to start cutting back our forces and leave the enemy encouraged to believe that if they just want, they don’t really have to negotiate now.”\(^310\) Nixon also reminded voters that he had been out in front on ARVN improvement and de-Americanization. He took Clifford’s September statements as proof the administration had moved too slowly on bettering South Vietnamese forces, especially since it was his “hope for [the] reduction of American military units.” Humphrey’s feeble attempts to break with


\(^{310}\) Nixon quoted in Mann, Grand Delusions, 617.
Johnson allowed Nixon to keep declaring he would “end the war on an honorable basis” without explaining his negotiation strategy or de-Americanization 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. Nixon had no secret plan but tailored his rhetoric to give the illusion that he did. With Humphrey and Nixon proposing virtually indistinguishable de-Americanization policies, the campaign shifted in another direction.  

Nineteen sixty-eight’s racial riots, campus unrest, antiwar protests, and counterculture alarmed most Americans, spurring a conservative reaction. Large numbers of citizens wanted the next president to return law and order to the nation. 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 Chicago mayor Richard Daley’s excessive use of police force, the protestors had an impact disproportionate to their limited numbers. Political historian Alan Brinkley wrote, 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.” Richard Nixon and American Independent Party candidate, George Wallace, made this theme a focal point of their campaigns while 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 two

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conservative candidates, Nixon and Wallace, getting 56% of the vote, Brinkley argued, “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.”

Nixon made himself the spokesman for those decent, law-abiding, hardworking men and women he called the “silent Americans.” They were “the great majority” of citizens: “the non-shouters, the non-protesters, the forgotten Americans.” Election Day was going to be their “Day of Protest” as they voted against high taxes, mob violence, an increasing crime rate, and a bankrupt foreign policy. Nixon further argued domestic unrest destroyed the nation’s foreign credibility “because a nation that cannot keep the peace at home will not be trusted to keep the peace abroad.” Nixon made this foreign policy connection a constant refrain in his law and order speeches. Without domestic tranquility, international respect and acquiescence to American leadership would crumble. Given how much U.S. allies feared America’s social turmoil and isolationism would cause a precipitate retreat from its global commitments, Nixon’s rhetoric may have been (if only slightly) more than just political grandstanding. Moreover, many Americans, including Laird, viewed settling or at least de-escalating the Vietnam War as a balm for the nation’s rising social and political unrest. As Nixon championed himself as the panacea for an endless war and turmoil at home, he further entwined Vietnam with domestic politics as he would marshal the “silent majority” to continue a Vietnamized war even as he needed to live up to his campaign promises on unrest by defusing antiwar protests. But for the

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present, Nixon’s goal remained winning the election while avoiding specific foreign policy
pronouncements to preserve the flexibility he would need in the White House.\textsuperscript{313}

Thus, Nixon ended September in an ideal position. Though his rival was gaining
momentum by promising to de-escalate the war, Nixon with Laird’s help had prevented
him from announcing a specific withdrawal timetable. Britain’s ambassador in
Washington sized up Humphrey’s difficult position and saw little hope for his campaign.
Ambassador Patrick Dean wrote of Humphrey, “There is more substance in any of his
statements, but the final impression is of a man thrashing about to make an impact, and
often looking over his shoulder for the boss’s expected disapproval too.” Humphrey
proved unable to escape the Democrats’ dilemma completely. Conversely, Nixon radiated
presidential statesmanship even as he reached out to anxious voters. Dean cabled London,
“The U.S. is Squaresville, and Nixon is the quintessential square…and it may be the main
reason why he will win.” Only the unexpected could deny Nixon the White House.\textsuperscript{314}

**October Surprises**

In October, the tide of events flowed from the world back to American shores,
influencing the election. The Johnson administration, the presidential candidates, U.S.
allies and enemies, and especially the Vietnamese recognized the political effect of a
bombing halt and negotiations on the election and ultimately long-term U.S. foreign policy.
Historian Lien-Hang Nguyen captured the moment perfectly, “In the weeks preceding

\textsuperscript{313} RN, Address at Santa Clara University, 9/5/1968, PPS 208:96:9, RNLBF; Statement, RN,
B’nai B’rith Convention, 9/8/1968, in *Nixon Speaks Out*, 253; and RN, “To Keep the Peace,” 10/19/1968 in
*Nixon Speaks Out*, 229.

\textsuperscript{314} Dispatch, Pat Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 10/1/1968, FCO 7/742, PRO; and telegram no. 2945,
Pat Dean, “Presidential Election Campaign,” 10/2/1968, FCO 7/747, PRO.
Election Day, then, intrigue permeated the corridors of power not only in the United States, but also in the two Vietnams, as leaders in Saigon and Hanoi both tried to manipulate American electoral politics to further their own objectives in the war.\textsuperscript{315} International and domestic actors all sought to manipulate events in their favor as all eyes darted from American politics to the Paris negotiations.

In truth, there were two “October Surprises.” The first was President Johnson’s October 31 announcement that he would cease all bombing of North Vietnam and that negotiations with North Vietnam and the NLF would commence before the November 5 election. The second was South Vietnam’s refusal to participate in these talks. In part, both surprises were intended to influence the U.S. presidential election; the former for Humphrey, the latter for Nixon. With the future of America’s Vietnam strategy at stake, such schemes seemed worth the risk.

Since talks had began on May 13, there had been no progress. Hanoi insisted on NLF representation and an unconditional U.S. bombing halt. President Johnson demanded the North Vietnamese vacate the DMZ, allow Saigon representation at Paris, and match any American de-escalation, particularly by ending Communist shelling of South Vietnamese cities. Saigon opposed both the NLF presence in Paris and a cessation of American bombing. Observers agreed that should these intractable sides somehow come together before the November 5 election, it would be an “October Surprise.”

Johnson administration officials understood the political value of the Paris talks. Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford saw progress in Paris as the one, real threat to Nixon’s

\textsuperscript{315} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 129.
election. Clifford told his staff, “If I were Nixon, the one development that would worry me would be the announcement that real Paris progress was being made, that bombing was stopping, and substantive talks starting. He now has going for him the ‘disenchantment’ with the war—if he can keep things as they are now he’s the beneficiary.” Law and order politics played well for Nixon at home, but as Clifford recognized, he was susceptible to foreign developments beyond his control. Similarly, Paul Warnke opposed an October meeting of the Vietnam troop contributing countries as the most likely outcome would be a restatement of their commitment, reminding the public of the stalemate and thus hurting Humphrey’s campaign. But a complete bombing halt would be a “tremendous political plus” for the Vice President.316

Most Washington policymakers sought peace for its own sake, though. Clifford continued to press LBJ and urged him “to settle it and not turn over to Nixon the honor of settling it all!” Clifford argued a bombing halt would produce serious talks with Hanoi that would quickly lead to a peace settlement. Clifford promised the President, “We will accomplish peace….I give you 65 to 35 chance it’ll work.” President Johnson’s conditions for serious talks remained the same, but Clifford’s persistence was paying off. With military officials acquiescing to a unilateral bombing halt and political pressures rising, LBJ tentatively agreed to stop the northern bombing if Hanoi accepted American conditions.317

316 Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 8/12/1968, #72, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [1],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL; and memo, Warnke to Clifford, 9/23/1968, #22, folder “Memoranda—Miscellaneous [1],” Box 7, CCP, LBJPL.
317 Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 9/25/1968, #107, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [2],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL (emphasis in the original); Acacia, Clark Clifford, 312-313; and Herring, America’s Longest War, 262.
Meanwhile, Hanoi’s attention also began to fixate on Paris. By late September, U.S. firepower had repulsed Le Duan’s third Tet offensive. Now losing the ground war in South Vietnam, Le Duan had to take negotiations seriously. He had not abandoned his quest to reunite Vietnam and would only negotiate the end of the U.S. “invasion,” but the appearance of flexibility with the promise of substantive talks in the context of the American election could bring about a complete bombing halt. If successful, U.S. de-escalation would afford Communist forces a needed breathing space while advancing reconstruction efforts in the North. The Politburo believed President Johnson would make peace overtures and de-escalate the war during his remaining time in office and that the election gave Hanoi an increased advantage. They figured that regardless of who won the election, President Johnson would set an irrevocable course toward peace and that domestic pressure would similarly dictate that the new president continue unilateral de-escalation. It was time to capitalize on U.S. politics and secure a complete bombing halt, though. As American representatives conceded on NLF participation in Paris, Le Duan and Le Duc Tho softened Hanoi’s position by allowing Saigon’s presence and promising “serious” talks could begin seven to ten days after a bombing halt with a pledge to start them before the election. Their agreement to quadripartite talks was a ploy to end LBJ’s bombardment of North Vietnam while getting the NLF delegation official recognition, an act sure to increase NLF legitimacy and strain Washington-Saigon relations. If negotiations
accomplished nothing else, these October developments would give Hanoi the time and space necessary to regroup before continuing their military conquest of South Vietnam.\footnote{Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 123-128; Ang, \textit{Ending the Vietnam War}, 14; and Pierre Asselin, \textit{A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 5-9.}

South Vietnamese watched events in America and Paris with unease. U.S. diplomats in Saigon noted many locals felt that Johnson would adopt a bombing halt “to help [the] Humphrey campaign, and would be pursued with little or no regard for the interests of South Viet-Nam.” American ambivalence about the NLF as a distinct entity at Paris and desire for a speedy settlement seemed proof electoral considerations motivated Washington. President Thieu maintained his government’s position that Hanoi would have to match any cessation of Northern bombing with reciprocal de-escalation of the Southern ground war. Nor would South Vietnam ever recognize or negotiate directly with the NLF, though he agreed they would meet with them as part of a united DRV delegation. On October 23, Thieu argued to U.S. ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that allied concessions bestowed benefits and legitimacy to the militarily weak parties—North Vietnam and the NLF.\footnote{Nguyen recognized that because of the failed Tet offensives they were indeed in weaker position militarily and diplomatically and that the military-political situation in South Vietnam did not justify NLF participation. See Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 124-125.} Thieu also made clear that they “could not accept to have the NLF at the conference as a separate entity.” Likewise, the Lower House of the Vietnamese legislature passed a resolution that rejected an unconditional halt and stated “the NLF cannot be accepted to take part in peace talks in any manner.” Ever the firebrand, Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky summed up South Vietnamese sentiment, “They (the Johnson Administration) are selling us out for their electoral interests….There is no reason why we
should be in a hurry [to settle] just because the United States will have an election in a few days.” Yet as a client state, South Vietnam sent mixed signals back to Washington as Saigon feared that too much intransigence might lead to a coup against the Saigon regime or sharp reductions in aid. Nevertheless, they registered their opposition to U.S. policymakers.320

Richard Nixon also had good reason to fear an “October Surprise.” A dramatic breakthrough in Paris could fuel Humphrey’s momentum as voters connected peace in Vietnam with Democratic continuity in the White House. With Henry Kissinger and others feeding Nixon sensitive information, he was well aware of the administration’s shifting policy. Indeed, Kissinger was helping both Humphrey and Nixon’s campaign as he angled for a top spot in the next administration. From Kissinger’s secret information, Nixon knew by late September that the Johnson administration would likely declare a complete bombing halt before the election. Although Nixon had promised LBJ he would continue his moratorium on discussing negotiations, Nixon interpreted Johnson’s moves as a direct threat to his candidacy. Campaign advisor H.R. Haldeman urged Nixon to consider issuing a preemptive press release reminding voters of Democrats’ credibility problems and claiming that Humphrey was as likely to escalate the war and increase deployments as he was to de-Americanize it. Nixon voiced his opposition to giving anything away, including a bombing pause, without enemy concessions in advance, though he made clear he would

support the President’s decision. With the race closer than ever, Nixon began taking clandestine steps to minimize the effect of any foreign development.\textsuperscript{321}

Saigon already appreciated they would do better with Nixon in the White House than with Humphrey, and going through the stalwart anticommunist Republican Anna Chennault, Nixon’s team confirmed this assumption to Ambassador Bui Diem. On October 23, Diem cabled Thieu, “Many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm.”\textsuperscript{322} Later, Chennault sent another message from Nixon’s staff to Saigon, “hold on [and do not go to Paris], we are gonna win.” Of course the South Vietnamese would never sell out their national interests in Paris. Nixon exploited the international situation; he did not create it.\textsuperscript{323}

By late October, the Johnson administration mistakenly concluded everyone was on board for substantive talks. On October 31, President Johnson ignored Saigon’s protests and announced an immediate bombing halt and that serious negotiation would soon commence. Thieu balked.

Thieu’s refusal to participate in the Paris talks should have surprised no one as the South Vietnamese had made clear they doubted Hanoi’s sincerity and opposed NLF participation and any North Vietnamese reprieve from American bombing. London


policymakers believed Thieu had his own domestic, political motivations. They argued, “If [Thieu] had not taken the line he did he might well have lost effective control in Saigon, where political stability is an essential basis for a strong negotiating position in Paris.” Instead, Thieu’s defiance and accompanying speech before the National Assembly precipitated a groundswell of public support. South Vietnamese editorials interpreted the halt as a move to help Humphrey and took great pride in Thieu’s resistance, calling his stand “one of the finest moments of the Second Republic.” By registering Saigon’s disapproval with U.S. unilateralism, Thieu had bolstered his position at home at the expense of American goodwill.324

Clark Clifford and numerous other Americans were irate. Clifford was volatile and ready to tell Saigon “Screw You” and dump them. From that point on, Clifford favored a cease-fire in place and began pushing LBJ to withdraw some forces before his term ended. But as Paul Nitze tried to impress upon the Secretary of Defense, obduracy was in South Vietnam’s national interest and so one could not attribute it solely to Nixon’s influence. Nitze cautioned, he did not “want to throw [South Vietnam] away by angry, ill-chosen reactions!” Clifford remained antagonistic toward Saigon, but his tenure as Secretary of Defense would soon end.325

Wiretaps on the Nixon campaign made President Johnson aware of these machinations. Rightfully upset, LBJ believed, “It would rock the world if it were known that Thieu was conniving with the Republicans.” Presumably because the wiretaps had at

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best dubious legality, Johnson kept the matter to himself. But Johnson also remained steadfastly behind South Vietnam and would not do anything to compromise the war or his successor’s chances. Nixon had won the presidential election by the narrowest of margins despite the halt and perhaps because of Thieu. Nixon and Thieu would have to solve the war together.\footnote{Berman, No Peace, No Honor, 34-35.}

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 mutual withdraw settlement and accelerated programs to build up ARVN forces. 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, yet, de-escalation and negotiation always competed with renewed bombing. The 1968 presidential election reflected these circumstances as both candidates gradually adopted de-Americanization positions. Looking at the domestic situation from abroad, America’s allies and enemies recognized that the United States could not continue the war forever and that failure to achieve peace with honor would invite social unrest and have grave consequences for the nation’s global commitments.

Indeed, America’s desire for law and order played a decisive role in Nixon’s victory over Humphrey. Nixon was now free to chart his own path in Vietnam, but even the “Forgotten Americans” spokesman could not escape domestic realities. The Republican
White House would have to make good on its promise to de-Americanize the war and quickly.
6. The Writing on the Wall:

De-Americanization, November 1968 - January 1969

Nineteen sixty-eight had been a tumultuous year. The Tet Offensive had shaken any remaining public confidence that victory was around the corner. A sitting president assessed the war and the home front and chose not to seek reelection. Unrest broke out in America’s cities and universities. And two presidential candidates battled for control over the White House and America’s Vietnam War.

Despite all the year’s turmoil, the interim between the November 5 election and Richard Nixon’s January 20 inauguration revealed how contingent de-Americanization was. Both in Johnson’s White House and Nixon’s headquarters, all agreed the people demanded de-escalation and that resuming or even expanding the bombing against North Vietnam would invite domestic trouble. Yet, both leaders continued to consider this escalatory option whereas plans for de-Americanizing the Vietnam War made little headway. The Johnson administration did not develop a single plan to withdraw U.S. soldiers unilaterally, nor would LBJ consider even making a token reduction to better his presidential legacy. Likewise, Nixon refused to commit to any one strategy before the inauguration, and his choices for National Security Advisor and Secretary of Defense left the U.S. government again divided over escalation versus de-escalation strategies.

Nevertheless, there was broad agreement that the American public was growing tired of the war and of carrying the burden of world defense. Though Johnson’s strategists failed to develop de-Americanization, they did begin planning an end to interventionism. So too, Nixon campaigned on a foreign policy that required greater responsibility from the South Vietnamese as well as all of America’s partners. They recognized that Congress and
the public had no stomach for more Cold War guarantees. Instead, there was growing revulsion toward existing pledges, especially troop deployments abroad; reductions appeared certain.

America’s allies and enemies read the writing on the wall. They weighed the public’s willingness to maintain U.S. commitments at their current levels and found this resolve wanting. The Vietnamese expected a Vietnamized war. The Australians and British assumed there would be a general de-Americanization worldwide, reducing America’s military presence in Asia and Europe. Whether this withdrawal would be a tactical retreat or become an irrational flight, remained uncertain. To U.S. and foreign policymakers alike, the degree and pace of de-Americanization was bound to the nation’s political and social exigencies.

**Lyndon Johnson: Winding Up without Winding Down**

For the remainder of his term, President Lyndon Johnson continued to wrestle with whether or not to resume bombing North Vietnam. Conversely, he would not even allow de-escalation and troop reductions any further consideration. Even a token withdrawal to better his historical image was anathema as the hope of eventual victory in Vietnam proved irresistible once again. Military options poured into the White House, and Hanoi’s violations of the October understanding only encouraged Johnson to act. Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford found himself increasingly isolated from the president due to his dovish views. As Clifford understood, it was Johnson’s final opportunity to leave behind a legacy of de-escalation. Instead, LBJ refused to commit to any policy in order to afford maximum flexibility to his successor. In its final days, the Johnson administration did approve plans to expedite ARVN improvement but nowhere did it
develop a plan to begin withdrawing U.S. troops unilaterally. To the extent that the issue came up, de-Americanization seemingly existed to give the president one more reason to curse the doves. In LBJ’s mind, he had already conceded too much to the perfidious North Vietnamese.327

By mid-November, it seemed to U.S. policymakers and generals that rather than pursuing peace, the North Vietnamese were taking advantage of the bombing halt to regroup, rebuild, and recharge their war of aggression against the South, prompting renewed debate over bombing. American and British diplomats agreed that North Vietnam was violating the agreement by sending soldiers across the DMZ. Rusk told the British, “Every dog may be allowed one bite, but unless these attacks stop very soon, the administration will not tolerate it and will resume the bombing.” LBJ was similarly fed up. In early December, Johnson told his advisors,

I think we are justified in resuming the bombing. We have tested them and they have been proved wanting. I would like to leave office de-escalating—not escalating—but I do not want to make a phony gesture. I do not want to run. We have listened to doves. We have tested them. We don’t want a sellout.

As Johnson and the hawks saw it, they had tested Hanoi’s promises of peace and the dove’s de-escalation; both were found wanting. Every indication American analysts received pointed to Hanoi significantly increasing their infiltration and building up their forces in the South for a renewed offensive. Even in the context of tentative negotiations, power had its place.328

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American policymakers again considered the role and threat of force in advancing negotiations. Maxwell Taylor informed LBJ that it was debatable whether the United States had the means to prevent Hanoi from stalling in Paris without recourse to bombing North Vietnam. Clifford’s team at the Pentagon, while universally opposed to a “military policy of maximum pressure,” recognized the diplomatic value of U.S. threats to resume bombardment and preferred to keep it as a “bargaining card.” Even a dove like Paul Warnke contended American diplomats in Paris should use the threat of B-52 attacks as leverage and that any unilateral reduction in “military operations could weaken our bargaining position.” With the Johnson administration drawing to a close and doves on the defensive, Rostow best summed up LBJ’s position, “We must stay with all military pressure until we get a political settlement!”

Never did President Johnson consider or his staff create a plan to begin withdrawing American troops from Vietnam. Clifford was once again a lonely voice for reductions and de-escalation. Focused on negotiations and the ongoing debate over the bombing halt, no one in the Johnson administration developed a de-Americanization policy.

Every scenario for U.S. redeployments hinged on a settlement leading to the termination of hostilities and followed by the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese regulars and American ground troops, and many of these plans left a large residual allied presence in South Vietnam. Paul Nitze and Paul Warnke were the principal architects of this Termination or T-Day planning. Like the rest of Johnson administration planning,

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their T-Day formulations rejected unilateral withdrawal from the outset. As the military understood it, T-Day occurred when hostilities ended, NVA forces had returned to North Vietnam leaving no units in Laos or Cambodia, Hanoi returned American POWs, terrorism in the South diminished, and all sides reached an agreement preserving the Republic of Vietnam and allowing continued U.S. aid to that country. With these stringent conditions met, R-Day (for redeployments) would follow. Clifford truthfully told the press in December, “We do not have any plans at the present time for a net reduction in our troops in Vietnam….At no time did I mean to suggest or infer [sic] that there would be any unilateral withdrawal of troops on our part. Our withdrawal of troops will be on a mutual basis with those of North Vietnam.” Though T-Day planning included various timetables for mutual withdrawal, none of them correlated with American plans to improve and modernize the South Vietnamese military.330

Since Tet, ARVN improvement plans had continued apace. On October 23, Clifford approved the first phase of this expansion—upgrading Vietnamese units with U.S. equipment. Phase II, approved December 18, supported General Abrams’s accelerated improvement scheme, providing for the creation of a self-sufficient Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) capable of defeating the indigenous insurgency and attainable within five years. Demonstrating administration faith in a settlement, Phase I assumed U.S. forces would maintain their present strength until they achieved victory or American

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330 Clarke, Advice and Support, 302-304; minutes, R. Eugene Livesay, 12/16/1968, #24, folder “Minutes of SoD Staff Meetings, Oct ’68-Jan ’69,” Box 18, CCP, LBJPL; memo, Wheeler to Clifford, 12/12/1968, #44, folder “RVNAF Improvement and Modernization [2],” Box 25, CCP, LBJPL; news conference, Clifford, 12/10/1968, #20, folder “Press Conferences [2],” Box 7, CCP, LBJPL.
diplomats brokered a favorable peace deal. They similarly predicated Phase II on the mutual withdrawal of NVA and U.S. troops.\textsuperscript{331}

But the kernel of Vietnamization—American reductions tied to South Vietnamese improvement—was taking root. In December, the Joint Chiefs argued the Defense Department needed to tie T-Day planning to ARVN improvement programs. Meanwhile, other officials, including Paul Nitze, began calling for a Phase III plan to provide for an “optimum counter-insurgency force” that might also allow some American reductions. In January, General Abrams and President Thieu were again discussing the prospects and virtues of reductions. Ever the advocate of de-Americanization, Paul Warnke used these private talks to suggest Clifford request the JCS prepare withdrawal figures in the neighborhood of forty-five thousand men. Warnke argued that unilateral redeployments should begin in May 1969 “to impress all concerned with the importance of early substantive withdrawals.” Nevertheless, time had run out on the Johnson administration. No actual plans existed, nor would there have been any presidential support for them if they had.\textsuperscript{332}

Clark Clifford ended his tenure as Secretary of Defense isolated and depressed, though in the absence of any formal withdrawal plans, he persisted in advocating a token

\textsuperscript{331} Krepinevich, The Army and Vietnam, 251; memo, Westmoreland to Clifford, 11/15/1968, #51n, folder “RVNAF Improvement and Modernization [2],” Box 25, CCP, LBJPL; memo, Victor K. Heyman, 12/11/1968, #43a, folder “RVNAF Improvement and Modernization [2],” Box 25, CCP, LBJPL; minutes, R. Eugene Livesay, 12/16/1968, #24, folder “Minutes of SoD Staff Meetings, Oct ’68-Jan ’69,” Box 18, CCP, LBJPL.

reduction. Clifford’s reasoning was fourfold: reductions would pay back Saigon for refusing to attend the Paris talks, put increased pressure on them to negotiate and improve their military, prevent a domestic catastrophe, and finally burnish Johnson’s presidential legacy. Clifford was convinced Saigon did not want peace but an ongoing war with U.S. support and money to “grind down the North Vietnamese.” Troop reductions would pressure Saigon into accepting a political settlement and make “them wake up” to the realities of the situation. He worried their intransigence could destroy any remaining domestic support for the war and that Congress and the American public would “react violently” and “bring down [the] roof on our heads” if the fighting continued. Clifford proposed Johnson withdraw five thousand men before Nixon’s inauguration as a “symbol—getting the whole [Americanization] process reversed.” Clifford also held out the naïve hope that North Vietnam would respond in kind, removing their forces from South Vietnam. Clifford lamented to his staff how he wanted to start America on the road to peace and “do something for LBJ’s reputation.” Clifford announced, “It’s too bad. No movement. I had hoped we could get movement for President Johnson’s record and so [the] new administration would have something moving.”

Yet, President Johnson and the hawks rebuffed the very idea of a token reduction. Johnson had an entirely different view about his legacy, hoping that he would leave Richard Nixon the flexibility necessary to prosecute the war. Victory or at least peace with honor would allow Johnson to claim that America’s defense of South Vietnam had been right and

that his policies preserved freedom there. Like the bombing halt, any reduction would set a powerful precedent perhaps limiting Nixon. Thus, when Clifford told LBJ and his closest advisors, “I think the talks will get us somewhere. I would like to withdraw a contingent of troops….It would be a great day to pull out 5000,” they ignored Clifford’s comment entirely. When the matter came up at a later meeting, they again rejected the idea. Rusk countered, “I think that is the wrong way to get peace in South Vietnam. We must be careful about a token withdrawal of forces. We agreed to pour it on in South Vietnam after the bombing was halted. I would not have a token withdrawal…..I am for a total mutual reduction.” General Wheeler chimed in, “A piecemeal approach to military de-escalation is the worst thing you could have.” Johnson agreed and suggested it was time to resume the bombing. Perhaps disciplined for his errant views, Clifford held a mid-December press conference again denying any plans to reduce America’s presence in Vietnam.\footnote{LBJ, The Vantage Point, 529-531; notes on meeting, Tom Johnson, 11/20/1968, #95, folder “Nov. 20, 1968—Meeting with Tuesday Luncheon,” Box 4, TJNM, LBJPL; and notes on meeting, Tom Johnson, 12/3/1968, #104, folder “Dec. 3, 1968—1:29-2:54pm Tuesday Luncheon,” Box 4, TJNM, LBJPL.}

Clifford’s frustration with Saigon and the White House began boiling over, and by the end of LBJ’s term, even Clifford’s faithful staff began to regard the secretary as a loose cannon. Clifford was ready to expose South Vietnamese treachery to the world. His staff expressed their concern for their boss; he was too emotional and upset and would cause irreparable harm if he vented these feelings publicly. As Clifford’s assistant George Elsey saw it, Clifford was “trying to identify himself with what is obviously and inevitably what the Nixon Administration is going to do and he will get some credit….He is utterly unrealistic in thinking he can do anything now other than cause trouble and get personal
publicity.” Clifford continued his long tirades against Saigon, though. Elsey noted, “Clifford is so persuaded to his own anti-Saigon views that it’s hard for him to conceive of [the] fact he is still largely alone….He is conducting a feud against Saigon, but White House and State are not.” Paul Warnke recognized Vietnam divided the U.S. government and that most were against a deal with Hanoi. South Vietnam was only protecting its interests, and Clifford would have to fix Washington before he could condemn the Vietnamese. Warnke pointed “out Clifford has gone too far in putting blame on Saigon…the real problem is here at the White House and State.”

Warnke was right. President Johnson spent his remaining time in office dithering on whether to restart the aerial destruction of North Vietnam or pursue negotiations without Saigon. The very mention of unilateral reductions remained heretical. American troops would only leave as a result of a negotiated mutual withdrawal. Until then, the United States would maintain its military posture in South Vietnam. LBJ simply refused to wind down the war effort. Although T-day and ARVN improvement plans provided a rough outline for how U.S. forces could withdraw from Vietnam, de-Americanization did not exist during Johnson’s tenure. President Johnson left that planning and decision entirely up to his successor, Richard Nixon.

Richard Nixon: Building an Administration, Fighting Over Strategy

President-elect Richard Nixon had a busy agenda ahead of his January 20 inauguration. Along with making the normal presidential appointments, Nixon intended to centralize foreign policy decision-making in the White House and further develop his

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335 Notes of Meeting, George Elsey, 12/21/68 (#188), 1/4/1969 (#205), folder “Van de Mark transcripts [2],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL.
Vietnam strategy. With the help of Henry Kissinger he laid the foundation for the former, but Nixon proved incapable of settling on the latter. For fifteen years, Nixon had told presidents how to conduct the wars in Indochina, but once elected, he had trouble deciding whether to renew hostilities against North Vietnam, striking the decisive blow, or de-Americanize the war with the hope of preserving both domestic tranquility and South Vietnam. As it happened, his appointees were as divided over Vietnam as he was.

The president elect’s first order of business was to assemble his Cabinet and foreign policy team. From the onset, Richard Nixon intended to fulfill his aspirations to become a world statesman. Unencumbered by Washington bureaucracy, he would act as his own secretary of state. His handpicked advisors and officials would either help him achieve this goal or at least stay out of his way.

For this reason, Nixon chose successful lawyer William P. Rogers to be his secretary of state. Rogers and Nixon had worked together off and on since the 1940s, and their relationship developed into a relatively close friendship in the 1950s, particularly while Rogers was President Eisenhower’s Attorney General. But Rogers had not participated in the campaign and so expected no role in the Nixon White House. As more forceful and experienced men declined the position, Nixon fell back on his trusted friend, surmising Rogers would carry out presidential orders without advancing his own interests. Rogers realized his secondary status going in. He recalled, “I was prepared to play a subordinate role. I recognized that he wanted to be his own foreign policy leader and did not want others to share that role….I knew that Nixon would be the principal actor.”

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337 Rogers quoted in Hersh, Price of Power, 32.
Rogers would become a consistent advocate of negotiations and de-Americanization while criticizing those who would advocate escalation and risk domestic backlash. Influential through 1969, Rogers increasingly found himself outside of the president’s inner circle, though. Nixon would seldom allow the State Department or Secretary Rogers to intervene in his foreign affairs.338

Conversely, the designated Secretary of Defense, Representative Melvin Laird appreciated that a cabinet position and a voice in the White House did not correlate with real power. Laird was a brilliant political tactician who had campaigned with Nixon and prevented Nixon’s rival Hubert Humphrey from outflanking him on de-Americanization. Laird had not planned to leave Congress, and after the election, he 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. Laird’s acceptance came at a price: he demanded and won the ability to appoint Defense officials free from presidential oversight, giving him considerable authority. Dwight Eisenhower had warned Nixon that Laird was “the smartest of the lot, but he is too devious.” Yet, both Eisenhower and Nixon acknowledged the president elect badly needed this cunning if he was to have any hope of running the Pentagon and getting congressional support for his policies. Even British observers spotted his craftiness. They noted, “Laird has been seen as the real leader of the Republicans in the House….There are many who believe [House Minority Leader] Ford to be subservient to Laird’s influence.” They also quipped that Laird was “a professional politician par excellence,” “an extremely tough character,” and “said to be mistrusted by

liberals (and some conservatives).” Unlike Rogers, Laird ruled the Pentagon and used this power to advance and protect Vietnamization. As Kissinger came to appreciate, Laird did not fight losing battles but deftly used his political influence and control over Defense Department bureaucracy to pursue his aims even when they were at odds with the White House.\(^{339}\)

Foreign policy academic and Nelson Rockefeller advisor Henry Kissinger would become Laird’s foremost rival for influence over Nixon’s Vietnam strategy but he was an unforeseen pick for National Security Advisor. Kissinger had helped broker the Vietnam plank at the GOP national convention and greatly aided the Nixon campaign by providing sensitive information regarding developments within the Johnson administration on the Paris talks and bombing halt. Kissinger was angling for a position in the Nixon administration, but to most observers any high-level appointment seemed unlikely. Among the nation’s foreign policy elite, most expected he would at best receive an analytical post or a perfunctory chairmanship at the State Department. Future Kissinger staffer, Roger Morris, summarized Kissinger’s desperate position:

> For his decade of hard work and opportunities, there had been an embarrassing failure in Washington, two campaigns with a losing candidate, a diminishing academic base, accompanied by the usual acid faculty politics and the personal trauma of divorce. The record had an accumulating sense of the also-ran, the marginal, the unrealized.

Yet, Kissinger’s actions that fall had caught Nixon’s attention.\(^{340}\)


Nixon had followed Kissinger’s writing and career since the 1950s, finding much to endear Kissinger to him. Though Kissinger had worked for Nixon’s political rival, Nixon and Kissinger had a similar outlook on international relations. Both understood the realities of power, having a penchant for coercive diplomacy, but they also believed America’s credibility mattered. Nixon’s foreign policy advisor Richard Allen appreciated Kissinger’s intellect, contribution to the campaign, and compatibility with Nixon’s realism, and so suggested he pick Kissinger as his National Security Advisor. Lacking a base of power and influence in Washington, Kissinger would owe his post to Nixon’s patronage, leaving him beholden to Nixon. Although initially ambivalent, Nixon chose Kissinger perhaps in large part because of another shared belief—their mutual hatred of bureaucracy.\footnote{Hersh, \textit{Price of Power}, 12, 19; and Dallek, \textit{Partners in Power}, 81-84.}

Both men had long held that Washington bureaucracies hindered leaders from acting as decisive statesmen, and they quickly worked to consolidate their power before the inauguration. As late as October 1968, Kissinger had argued that bureaucratic inertia and narrow-mindedness hampered effective U.S. decision making. Nixon’s transition team not only fretted over governmental torpor but also feared that most of the foreign policy establishment was incurably liberal and would oppose the president’s conservative policies. As one memo put it, “Mr. Nixon’s candidacy not only was unsupported by nearly 90% of the personnel of the Department of State—it was opposed, at least passively.” Given such a hostile environment, Nixon and Kissinger decided to disarm the bureaucrats before they arrived in Washington. After Nixon offered Kissinger the position on
November 27, the pair began a “quiet coup” to usurp foreign policy power from the State and Defense Departments.³⁴²

Nixon had established his pre-inaugural base of operations in the Hotel Pierre in Manhattan. Privy to some of these discussions, Alexander Haig remembered the setting well, “The Pierre is a grand hotel of the old luxurious style that was already well past its best days in 1968. The small room in which Kissinger received me was crowded with reproductions of French furniture, overheated, underlighted, and more than a little shabby.” As Roger Morris has written, within these rooms Nixon and Kissinger “promptly conceived and began what would become a seizure of power unprecedented in modern American foreign policy.” Nixon wanted to reinvigorate the National Security Council (NSC) to enhance his authority at the expense of the departmental bureaucracies and their prerogatives. Kissinger’s proposed changes would increase the National Security Advisor’s power by allowing him to set the NSC agenda, approve other agencies’ papers, and order national security studies. In theory, this restructuring would allow Kissinger and Nixon to determine the direction of foreign policy debates or at least overwhelm officials with diversionary research directives.³⁴³

This revised structure posed the greatest challenge to Laird and Rogers. Though focused on Vietnam strategy, Laird recognized the danger straight away and conveyed his disapproval to Kissinger on January 9. He warned that the changes would isolate the

president and the rest of the Cabinet from other sources of intelligence and would give Kissinger too much power while diminishing that of Cabinet members. Laird predicted that if a strong National Security Advisor closed the NSC channel, the Cabinet would have to go directly to the president. On the other hand, Rogers underestimated the threat and assented to the proposed changes. Rogers reasoned, “It doesn’t make any difference. I have a relationship with the President.”344 Events would prove Rogers wrong as Nixon approved the NSC changes and attempted to carry out foreign policy independent of Rogers and Laird.345

Nevertheless, both men retained significant clout, especially in 1969—the critical year in the development of Nixon’s Vietnam strategy. Rogers had the weight of the State Department behind him as well as the relative freedom to make public pronouncements that twisted Nixon’s arm. Laird retained complete control over the Pentagon and used a combination of leaks and political connections to lobby public opinion to his causes, particularly Vietnamization. Moreover, both men had the president’s ear in 1969, influencing him at key moments. Looking back, Kissinger admitted, “Until the end of 1970 I was influential but not dominant. From then on, my role increased as Nixon sought to bypass the delays and sometimes opposition of departments.” Kissinger and Nixon’s consolidation of power took time and effort. But their goal was clear. With the bureaucrats

344 Rogers quoted in Morris, *Uncertain Greatness*, 87.
and Cabinet distracted by domestic problems and the rest of the world, Nixon told Henry, “You and I will end the war.”

Henceforth, Nixon and Kissinger spent much of their time at Hotel Pierre devising how they would conduct and ultimately conclude the Vietnam War. At the 1968 Republican Convention, both had accepted de-Americanization but with Nixon now president-elect they chose to survey all their options. The pair assumed some withdrawal of American troops. 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. An October 31 working paper argued the president-elect could abandon South Vietnam, invade the North, continue the present strategy, or turn the war into “a long term police/self-help operation,” which would only require two hundred thousand U.S. troops. The paper noted, “It would be the best way to ‘de-Americanize’ the war. It could be the way out—an end to the war as we have known it.” But again, neither Kissinger nor Nixon were sold on this strategy, preferring to settle the war quickly either through diplomatic negotiations or by recourse to dramatic force.

At the White House on November 11, Nixon told President Johnson he wanted the war wound up “the quicker the better” but he refused to adopt the Johnson administration’s policies or accept their advice. Nixon recalled that 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

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necessary.” 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 South Vietnamese President 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.

Meanwhile, Kissinger was working independently to frustrate administration attempts to persuade South Vietnam to participate in the Paris talks. Before Nixon offered Kissinger the National Security Advisor post, Kissinger used Australian intermediaries to deliver a sensitive message to Saigon. Kissinger affirmed, “You have friends, take courage” and “drag your feet, slow everything up as much as possible.” Or in short, “Hold on: I am coming.” Kissinger recognized any South Vietnamese concession would reduce Nixon’s flexibility and overall bargaining power, so it was best that Saigon postpone any movement until after the inauguration.

Kissinger’s pre-inaugural statements made clear he stood by the Thieu regime and America’s commitment to South Vietnam. His landmark *Foreign Affairs* article “The Viet Nam Negotiations” enunciated a strategy similar to what he and Rockefeller had been

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350 One hopes Kissinger was being clever by quoting the title of the Sam & Dave song “Hold On, I’m Coming.”
working on. America and South Vietnam should focus on pacification and securing the population from insurgents, especially if Hanoi balked in Paris. A new, “less impatient strategy” would emphasize pacification, reduce U.S. casualties, encourage South Vietnamese political development, and strengthen ARVN forces so that American soldiers could begin returning home. But the core U.S. negotiating position remained unchanged—phased mutual withdrawal. Diplomats would bargain toward this end as allied forces would remain unbeatable. Kissinger wrote, “Since [Hanoi] cannot force our withdrawal, it must negotiate about it.” Indeed, America would have to persevere in South Vietnam because its global credibility was on the line. He argued, “However fashionable it is to ridicule the terms ‘credibility’ and ‘prestige,’ they are not empty phrases; other nations can gear their actions to ours only if they can count on our steadfastness.” In short, defeat would add “unreliability to the accusation of bad judgment.” While Clifford and others interpreted Kissinger’s article as proof that the new National Security Advisor was in solidarity with their moderate views, the reality was that Kissinger never relinquished his preference for savage diplomacy.352

Behind closed doors, Kissinger revealed that more than American credibility was on the line and that the Nixon administration would take dramatic steps to prevent South Vietnam’s fall. On December 19, Kissinger informed Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew that the Nixon administration “cannot afford to accept a clear U.S. defeat. Four years from now the U.S. public will have forgotten the agonies of the war, but will

remember that we lost in Vietnam and that it was the Nixon Administration that had agreed to the surrender.” Nixon could never afford this political and historical albatross. Renewed bombing and an ongoing war was preferable to abandoning the Republic of Vietnam.\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation, 12/19/1968, HAK 2:3, RNPLM.}

The following day, Kissinger told British officials the same—the Nixon White House would not countenance defeat in Vietnam and would instead choose a dramatic escalation of the war. He predicted there would be at least a year of difficult talks since Hanoi assumed America would abandon South Vietnam. Kissinger affirmed that the United States could never take this course. Instead, Kissinger declared, “I don’t mean that we should go to nuclear war” but “some quite tough measures might have to be taken to persuade them of [American resolve].” The British clearly understood Kissinger and Nixon’s intent. If necessary, the pair would apply punishing military force against the North Vietnamese to make them settle on American terms. They further observed that Kissinger already considered himself “Nixon’s principal foreign policy adviser.” Kissinger would indeed spend 1969 trying to compel Hanoi’s capitulation and consolidate his administrative power, but in the pre-inaugural interim, he continued to develop his coercive Vietnam strategy.\footnote{Notes, A.M. Palliser, “Notes on a Conversation with Dr. Henry Kissinger in New York on Friday, December 20, 1968,” 12/23/1968, PREM 13/2097, PRO.}

Nevertheless, Kissinger commissioned the RAND Corporation to ascertain alternative Vietnam strategies. The resulting 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.\footnote{Isaacson, 	extit{Kissinger}, 162.} 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.\footnote{Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 91.}

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 that the enemy was still on the run nearly a year after the Tet Offensive and that the United States should maintain or 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 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. 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{358} Above all else, Group B’s disengagement strategies stood in stark contrast to the escalatory measures proposed by Group A.\textsuperscript{359}

The RAND paper was not Kissinger’s only source of insight, and he particularly listened to Johnson’s hawkish advisers like Walt Rostow and Maxwell Taylor during the transition. In late December, Rostow wrote to Kissinger advising him to avoid “vague talk of de-escalation” as it could easily dishearten South Vietnamese and American troops while voicing his optimism that a settlement was possible in the next twelve to eighteen months. Taylor echoed Rostow’s concern over de-escalation. He argued that any unilateral withdrawal, whether a small token reduction or a larger withdrawal as part of a concerted plan, could encourage Hanoi to press on while discouraging the South Vietnamese. Additionally, Taylor feared that any reduction would create a thirst in America for “further withdrawals beyond prudence and safety.” The safe policy would maintain military

\textsuperscript{358} Isaacson, \textit{Kissinger}, 163.
\textsuperscript{359} Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 92-93.
pressure on the Communists until there was a peace deal, though even Taylor considered a Saigon-backed withdrawal plan if there was no settlement in sight by the end of 1969. Already criticizing the RAND paper for failing to consider the value of military threats in diplomacy and favoring a hardline stance, Kissinger began drawing up his own memo on Vietnam alternatives.\textsuperscript{360}

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 and early January. Nixon later reflected, “A strong case could be made for each option,” but at their very first discussion, Kissinger eliminated unilateral withdrawal as a viable choice. 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.” Like President Johnson, Nixon preferred hard-hitting options to de-escalation.\textsuperscript{361}

By mid-January then, Kissinger had boiled the available alternatives down to two: maintain the current effort while retaining the option to escalate the war or avoid escalation and begin reducing the American presence in South Vietnam. Kissinger confidently predicted that the former might lead to outright North Vietnamese defeat and perhaps the political collapse of the Communist regime. American persistence and escalation promised “speedy war termination” as Hanoi began sincere negotiations to avoid destruction and complete defeat. Kissinger’s escalation offered resumed interdiction campaigns over


\textsuperscript{361} Nixon, RV, 347; and Isaacson, Kissinger, 163.
North Vietnam, air and ground operations in Cambodia and Laos, unrestricted North Vietnamese bombing and mining, a limited invasion of North Vietnam and Laos, and perhaps a full-scale invasion of North Vietnam. Kissinger recognized, “Actual escalation could lead to substantial domestic controversy unless it brought a quick settlement. The domestic controversy, in addition to its adverse internal consequences (which could be quite serious) might encourage Hanoi to hold out without concessions, expecting the US to be forced ultimately to withdraw.” De-escalation would be less risky and expensive and might induce ARVN improvements even as it demonstrated to Hanoi America’s desire to negotiate an honorable settlement. Unlike escalation, this strategy would “improve the domestic political situation in the US.” Indeed, troop reductions would prolong American staying power. But Kissinger suggested a third option: threatening major escalation. To be impressive, Kissinger argued the threatened violence would have to go well beyond a resumption of President Johnson’s bombing campaigns. This “ultimatum” could increase Soviet, Chinese, and North Vietnamese desire for a settlement while preparing the way for an actual escalation should the gambit fail.362

Kissinger’s memo laid a blueprint for Nixon’s Vietnam War in 1969. Following his advice, Nixon would bomb Cambodia and threaten to level Hanoi and Haiphong to protect South Vietnam and bring the North Vietnamese to the negotiating table. As in the Johnson administration, escalation competed with de-escalation, principally de-Americanization, though all agreed the nation would not tolerate an endless war.

362 Memorandum on Vietnam Alternatives, HAK to RN, 1/16/1969, Box H:019:5, NSC-IF, RNPLM.
Contemporary polling indicated that the American public was often as split on Vietnam as Johnson and Nixon’s advisers but these indices pointed towards growing antipathy. An October 7 Harris poll showed forty-eight percent wanted de-escalation whereas forty-three percent opposed. Similarly, one statistical scholar’s detailed analysis of the election revealed that voters felt closer to Nixon because of his “stronger Vietnam stand” and because of his commitment to peace there. Yet, Americans had a decisive preference for some form of reductions. 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 increasingly favored U.S. troop withdrawals.

Yet, it was not so much surveys in early 1969 as their experiences in 1968 that convinced policymakers it was necessary to de-escalate the war. 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

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363 Harris polling quoted in Ambrose, Nixon, Volume II, 199.
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. For all they knew, 1969 could be much worse than 1968. Even if social disintegration represented the worst-case scenario, officials 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.\footnote{Suri, \textit{Power and Protest}, 2, 164.}

Indeed, Nixon and his counselors’ sense of public opinion tempered hawkish sentiment before the inauguration. Nixon had urged leading Republican senators to mobilize party members to highlight Hanoi’s perfidy and support any necessary military offensive lest Nixon “look like the man and the GOP the Party that lost the LBJ peace.” But congressional and public realities made this hawkish consensus-building an impossible task. Domestic advisor Daniel Moynihan warned the president-elect that Vietnam and the volatile domestic situation had the potential to destroy his presidency. Speechwriter Ray Price also noted the nation’s uncertain mood in the midst of disorder at home and an ongoing war abroad. Price captured the moment:

\begin{quote}
The people are waiting, wondering, disillusioned with easy promises, surfeited with expansive rhetoric, unhappy with the old and skeptical of the new—all gnawingly aware of a deep sickness in the society but most of them also fiercely, jealously protective of the good that they know is there too; apprehensive about the future; hoping for hope, but wanting more than empty hope.
\end{quote}
Resumed bombing and a war without end would dash these hopes and upset a fragile domestic order. Nixon’s instinct was for a decisive blow against Hanoi, but he could not risk losing the home front. 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.” Nixon would not abandon South Vietnam nor could he embrace the aggressive measures Kissinger and his Saigon allies desired without causing a social and political backlash at home.369

No one understood this domestic context better than Melvin Laird. Like Nixon and Kissinger, Laird remained committed to preserving the Republic of Vietnam. But because of 1968’s social unrest and diminishing support for the war, Laird concluded 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.” Laird could accelerate Johnson administration plans to strengthen ARVN forces and build on Nixon’s campaign rhetoric, which promised steady de-Americanization. By the end of 1968, he had fused the twin pillars of Vietnamization: the buildup of South Vietnam and the systematic, unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces from

Southeast Asia. Laird now had to develop de-Americanization into a working program and during the transition, he turned to his predecessor for help with this planning.  

Laird visited Clifford often in the weeks preceding Nixon’s inauguration, primarily to determine which staff to retain. Laird’s initial emphasis on personnel rather than Vietnam frustrated Clifford, but Laird’s purpose was to find the best Pentagon policymakers to help him create a de-Americanization program. After nearly a month of meetings, Clifford lamented that he and Laird had not had substantive conversations on strategic and military matters and that Laird continued to focus on staff. On January 6, Clifford told his staff, “He has said nothing [on Vietnam]; nor does he now show any inclination to talk.” When Vietnam finally came up, 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.” In private meetings, Clifford and Paul Warnke pressed Laird to withdraw American forces regardless of what occurred at the Paris negotiations. Yet, Laird kept his cards close to his chest, refusing to give any indication of future Nixon policies. Laird had found his man, though, and requested Paul Warnke stay on at the Department of Defense.

As late as March 1968, Laird had cultivated the concept of de-Americanization but he still lacked the detailed planning necessary to turn it into a reality; Paul Warnke provided this analytical specificity. As previously noted, Warnke believed America’s entrance into

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370 Interview of Laird by Maurice Matloff and Alfred Goldberg, September 2 and October 29, 1986, folder “Laird-Oral History Interviews (1-2),” Box D8, LP, GFL.
371 Laird, interview with author, 4/10/2007; Clifford, Counsel to the President, 603-604; minutes, R. Eugene Livesay, 12/16/1968 (#24), 1/6/1969, (#30), folder “Minutes of SoD Staff Meetings, Oct ’68-Jan ‘69,” Box 18, CCP, LBJPL; and notes of meeting, George Elsey, 1/16/1969, #221, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [2],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL.
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. 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 Laird was looking for an exit strategy
before his first meeting with Clifford. Warnke remarked to Clifford in early January that
his staying on was “an opportunity to warp their little minds while they’re still young,” but
unbeknownst to Warnke, Laird needed no convincing. He was already Nixon’s strongest
advocate for de-Americanization, and he would use Warnke to develop this program.
Warnke’s preliminary planning became the basis for Vietnamization, and the two would
soon begin work on a formal plan.372

By Nixon’s inauguration then, his two foremost advisors, Kissinger and Laird, had
settled on very different strategies for ending the Vietnam War. Trying to cut out the State
and Defense Departments, Kissinger lobbied for a militant Vietnam strategy that threatened
or resorted to the use of decisive military force against North Vietnam. Ultimatums and
escalatory planning could end the war quickly. Nixon had conveyed his own “madman
theory” to H.R. Haldeman during the campaign. Nixon would threaten to bring untold
destruction upon North Vietnam if they did not capitulate, and with Hanoi knowing

372Van Atta, With Honor, 158, 160-161; Clifford, Counsel to the President, 490-491; Interview with
Laird by A. James Reichley, 3/31/1978, folder “Foreign Policy Interviews, 1977-78: Laird, Melvin,” Box 1,
A. James Reichley Interview Transcripts, (1967) 1977-81, GFL; James Reichley, Conservatives in an Age
notes of meeting, George Elsey, 1/6/1969, #223, folder “Van de Mark transcripts [2],” Box 1, GEP, LBJPL.
Nixon’s abiding anticommunism and irrationality, the gambit would work.\textsuperscript{373} He further believed President Eisenhower had secured peace in Korea with a similar gamble, and Nixon was willing to try the same in Vietnam. Now with Kissinger at his side advancing similar arguments, the duo represented a “mad pair.” But Nixon’s other great advisor, Melvin Laird, counseled moderation.

Nixon, along with Laird, recognized the domestic constraints on any further escalation of the war, and had accepted de-Americanization during his presidential campaign. Nixon 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. Perhaps most importantly, 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. Laird agreed, and in his pre-inaugural meetings with the president-elect, he consistently focused on de-Americanization. As long as Laird’s long-haul strategy promised an eventual victory, Nixon would refrain from acting as the mad president.\textsuperscript{374}

With Kissinger favoring escalation and Laird preferring steady U.S. reductions, Vietnam divided Nixon’s closest advisers as the administration began. None could offer with any certainty a plan that would save both South Vietnam and the U.S. domestic front. Nixon 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{375}

\textsuperscript{373} See Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 76ff.
\textsuperscript{375} Nixon, \textit{No More Vietnams}, 102-104.
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 without arriving at a happy medium. Unfortunately for Americans and Vietnamese, Nixon possessed no secret plan at his January 20 inauguration. Instead, Laird and Kissinger would employ their respective resources to determine his Vietnam strategy. The stage was set for bureaucratic warfare within the Nixon administration.

Relinquishing the Burden: The Faltering Home Front & the Global Anticipation of Vietnamization and Nixon Doctrine

The Vietnam War reminded American politicians and policymakers that there were real domestic limits to an interventionist foreign policy. In 1968 and early 1969, Richard Nixon as well as Johnson administration strategists were trying to restore the balance by reducing the nation’s foreign obligations. De-Americanization was a global trend, not confined to Vietnam.

What historians call the Nixon Doctrine—Nixon’s strategy of relying on America’s regional partners to carry the burden of their own defense as U.S. troop commitments became untenable—long preceded his extemporaneous remarks in Guam 1969. He had borrowed the strategy from President Eisenhower, and he made it a constant campaign pledge in 1968. Moreover, after Tet, officials working under LBJ also advanced a similar strategy. Both Nixon and these strategists realized the American people and their congressional representatives would dictate a general retreat, and they hoped that by preempting these domestic pressures they could mitigate the effects on American internationalism and credibility.
Reading this same domestic context, U.S. allies anticipated this global de-Americanization. By late 1968, the Vietnamese concluded that American withdrawals were inevitable and imminent. Meanwhile, Australian and British officials in particular surmised America’s increasing emphasis on its regional partners in lieu of U.S. intervention. Again, foreign officials pinned the blame on America’s unstable internal situation. America’s potential for violent unrest, its electorate’s weariness of international commitments, and its unruly Congress threatened U.S. leadership and its stabilizing influence in the world. Regardless of whether or not leaders could deal with the problems at home, it seemed clear that the United States was relinquishing the burden of international defense. In short, Vietnam, Australia, and Great Britain correctly guessed the trajectory of American foreign policy and struggled to cope with this changing geopolitical environment.

Richard Nixon had long espoused a strategy that relied on client states as proxies for America’s Cold War battles. The United States would provide the guns, the money, and any necessary air/naval support but not the men. During the 1968 presidential campaign he had revived this old strategy as a “new diplomacy.” Nixon declared, “Economically, diplomatically, militarily, the time has come to insist that others must assume the responsibilities which are rightly theirs. The other nations of the world must begin and quickly, to pick up a greater share of the burden of common defense.” The era of unilateral American commitments was over. Working on Nixon’s major foreign policy campaign address, “To Keep the Peace,” Ray Price wrote, “It’s time we made sure that in the future we help others fight their war, if necessary, but we don’t do the fighting for them.” In the finished speech, Nixon told radio listeners that Asian strength meant they
could defend themselves without U.S. troops. These allies would have to respond to problems first; only if this collective resistance failed would America intervene. Nixon added that even Europeans would have to contribute more to their collective defense. U.S. partners would have to assume the burdens America could no longer afford, politically or financially. In short, Nixon argued that recognizing the limits of American power and guaranteeing U.S. friends could defend themselves was paramount to “ensuring that we have no more Viet Nams.”

Like Nixon, Johnson administration policymakers recognized the domestic factors that made this global de-Americanization necessary. These planners understood that U.S. politics was “geared to fight relatively short, intense wars with the aim of decisive battlefield results” whereas Communists preferred protracted conflicts. Hence, Vietnam had sapped American willpower. Moreover, public and congressional sentiment thought America was doing more than its fair share worldwide and was so entitled to redeploy large numbers of troops home, despite the strategic risks. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia had forestalled congressional pressure for reductions in Europe, but all assumed these demands would resume shortly. Domestic circumstances dictated a significant change in U.S. foreign policy.

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Throughout the Washington bureaucracy, policymakers reached the same conclusion: now was the time to develop local defense and responsibility while reducing U.S. military commitments. They acknowledged this change reflected “pressures and problems here at home.” One paper concluded, “In any future strategy toward Asia, a guiding principle must be maximum reliance on our Asian allies to defend themselves.” Another noted, violence was “a fact of life” in developing countries and should not necessitate American intervention unless the “global balance of power” was at stake. Planners argued that the incoming Nixon administration should “set forth clearly to our own people and other countries its long term goal of sharing responsibility” and adopt a “coherent strategy” to achieve this end. Yet, officials grappled with how to meet domestic needs without scaring vital allies or emboldening enemies.378

With de-Americanization a political and social necessity, policymakers had to reduce U.S. commitments without this retrenchment turning into a global retreat in deed or appearance. With the British steadily withdrawing from Southeast Asia, the United States was the only great power capable of securing the region. Analysts argued that a precipitous withdrawal leading to defeat in Vietnam would “damage US prestige and credibility” in the area and perhaps encourage allies to adopt an attitude of “defeatism” toward Communism. For Asians, falling dominoes remained a real concern, and they would likely

bend in the wind, moving with the trend toward Communism even before South Vietnam fell. William Stearman, an expert on European and Vietnam affairs, contended,

What undoubtedly must concern Asian leaders is not only the triumph of Communism in South Viet-Nam, but also the resulting withdrawal of U.S. power from this area….If we fail in Viet-Nam it would be primarily because the American public is tired of our military commitment to this area, and no longer wants to make any sacrifices in its defense. And everybody would know this.


U.S. defense analysts considered America’s NATO contribution essential to deterring a conventional Soviet attack against Western Europe, but with growing domestic pressure to decrease troops there, adequate deterrence and American credibility were at stake. Policymakers argued that Czechoslovakia again proved that the Soviets were willing to use military means to solve their political problems in Europe. Despite much talk of détente between East and West, cutbacks could cripple NATO forces as a credible deterrent to Soviet aggression against Western Europe. Just as important, officials held that reductions could perhaps shake European faith in America’s commitment to Western defense, especially if Congress mandated the cuts. Indeed, it was not the prospect of
reductions but the uncertainty surrounding what Congress and the American public would demand that made European leaders uneasy. Analyst Miriam Camps wrote that they worry “that once the process begins there will be no reasonable, obvious, and clearly agreed holding point.” With an irrational public dictating de-Americanization, U.S. alliances and efforts could be stripped of their efficacy and their credibility. And the world was watching, anticipating the direction of American foreign policy.\(^{380}\)

Although Richard Nixon’s victory at the polls reassured the majority of South Vietnamese, most still believed American troop reductions were forthcoming. Britain’s Saigon embassy noted, “As expected, the predominant reaction in Government circles has been one of profound relief, even though no one seems clear why they believe that Nixon will take a stronger line with the Communists than would Humphrey.” Moreover, “determined to win” became the catchphrase of pro-Government Vietnamese to describe theirs and Nixon’s resolve. If that was the popular saying, the embassy recorded “de-Americanization” had become the “catch-word” around Saigon. Johnson’s 1968 policies and crumbling U.S. public support proved that ultimately the South Vietnamese would be responsible for their own survival. As one Vietnamese senator put it in early November, the war would be “Viet-Namised” regardless of who was U.S. president.\(^{381}\)

As more and more Americans soured on the war, Saigon believed it had to salvage its reputation and work with U.S. policymakers on a negotiating and Vietnamization


strategy before the new administration sold them down the river. In Washington, Ambassador Bui Diem wrote President Nguyen Van Thieu in January, warning him that Nixon’s policy was uncertain. Thieu needed to convince Nixon to accept a policy beneficial to South Vietnam, and Thieu had to act fast before the “American bureaucratic machinery” settled on a direction. Diem also argued that Saigon needed to win the “hearts and minds” of people and leaders in America as well as worldwide, perhaps by accepting U.S. reductions and the Paris talks. If Thieu did not move quickly and succeed in these endeavors, the public could override any policy favorable to South Vietnam’s survival. On January 16, South Vietnam joined the Paris talks but the issue of a gradual American withdrawal remained. The battle over “hearts and minds” had left the Vietnamese countryside; only by agreeing to U.S. withdrawals could Saigon hope to keep American goodwill.382

Already recognizing this grim reality, President Thieu continued to be out in front on de-Americanization. He had advocated this policy to LBJ in mid-1968 to alleviate Johnson’s domestic pressures, only to be rebuffed. With the impending change in the White House, Thieu spent January discussing de-Americanization with U.S. officials while preparing his people for the assumed withdrawals. His New Year’s Eve address was hopeful about the Republic’s future and argued that South Vietnam was increasingly able to defend itself without American forces. To that end, he declared South Vietnamese units were ready to replace some U.S. troops in 1969. His candor on de-Americanization would prepare his people for the day when the Americans began leaving his country, whether by

382 Bui Diem quoted in Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 138-139.
settlement or unilateral reductions. But only U.S. policymakers could give the order to bring the men home, and Thieu again urged them to start withdrawing some forces to save the American home front.\textsuperscript{383}

On January 17, Thieu, General Abrams, and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker met to discuss troop withdrawals. There, Thieu outlined his “three pillars” strategy for the first three months of 1969. Confident in the military and political situation in South Vietnam, Thieu would pursue negotiations that included direct talks with the NLF. He would also continue to emphasize pacification while building up ARVN forces so America could reduce its forces in Vietnam. As Bunker noted, Thieu was “serious about Allied troop withdrawals” and wanted South Vietnam “to carry its own burden.” But Thieu’s motivation came primarily from U.S. domestic circumstances. Bunker wrote that Thieu “recognizes the political pressure faced by the new administration and he is seeking ways by which he might help the American people to continue their support.” By advocating unilateral withdrawals, Thieu intended “to give the U.S. Government an assist, particularly in its relations with the American public, so that it may be able to maintain its program of assistance to South Vietnam and not undertake any precipitous withdrawal.” Moreover, Thieu wanted it known publicly that de-Americanization was a Vietnamese initiative, which it largely had been up to that point. As the British realized, Saigon was playing a “numbers game” to go on the record recommending a specific reduction in order to preempt the Americans. Thieu and the Vietnamese saw them as inevitable, and they could only

hope that by leading on the issue they could buy necessary time with the American public.\(^{384}\)

Thieu and his staff worked with Abrams often independently of Washington to plan these withdrawals. Abrams and Thieu believed that ARVN modernization and expansion along with progress in pacification justified redeployments. Optimistic, Thieu suggested they announce a two-division withdrawal rather than one to increase the effect on American opinion. Abrams agreed that they would have to present the reductions as a product of South Vietnamese strength to maximize the public impact but thought it premature to remove this many troops. Abrams instead proposed Washington remove the 9\(^{th}\) Division (approximately 18,000 men) from Vietnam in July. Though there was no corresponding policy development stateside, these January talks represented the first real conversations between the United States and Saigon regarding forthcoming withdrawals. Once in office, Laird would follow up on these discussions, building Vietnamese and MACV support for his Vietnamization program. In the interim, Thieu pushed de-Americanization as the South Vietnamese assumed not even Richard Nixon could resist public pressure for withdrawals.\(^{385}\)

The North Vietnamese and NLF had reached the same conclusion: despite allied military gains in 1968, the American people would demand Nixon de-escalate the war. A mid-December memo by the Communist Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN)


encouraged Southern cadres and argued U.S. withdrawals would be forthcoming in the New Year. January 1, the Hanoi Politburo cabled its Paris diplomats that Nixon had no choice but to de-escalate the war due to domestic pressure. With reductions seemingly inevitable, Communist negotiators should demand a complete American exit but appear cooperative so that the talks would not break down. Communists would use the talks to buy time so that they could improve their battlefield position and press on in their war against the Thieu government. Negotiations also held the promise of further dividing Saigon and Washington, preserving the bombing halt, and legitimizing the NLF. Surveying captured documents, Vietnamese prisoners’ testimonies, and North Vietnamese military moves, Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research Thomas Hughes understood their strategy. He noted to Rusk, they would concede just enough “to keep alive American convictions that negotiations are of value, will eventually bring the war to an end, and therefore must be continued” even as North Vietnam violated the “understandings” that produced the talks. With American reductions a near certainty, Hanoi would dither in Paris while continuing its offensives against South Vietnam.  

If the Vietnamese recognized the inevitability of U.S. withdrawals, so too did America’s allies worldwide. Though Australian Prime Minister John Gorton publicly described the American attitude toward Southeast Asian defense as “imponderable,” officials in Canberra understood the trajectory of U.S. grand strategy. Since mid-1968, their Washington counterparts had been intimating that henceforth America would only do

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its “fair share.” Informants in the Pentagon and State Department suggested an increasing preference for regional defense organizations to accept responsibility for their respective areas and combat insurgencies without U.S. participation. At the November ANZUS meeting in Washington, the Americans made “regional ‘self-help’” the theme of their formal and informal conversations. Given dwindling domestic support for significant commitments worldwide, these U.S. officials “emphasized they were not seeking to set the scene for their own withdrawal, but [trying] to secure a basis for their continued involvement.” Moreover, Richard Nixon’s statements and public writings indicated to Australian analysts that his administration would follow a similar course towards regionalism. Anticipating a Nixon doctrine of diminishing commitments abroad, Australian strategy shifted accordingly.387

Australia had been reevaluating its national defense strategy over the course of 1968, and in December its leaders decided to continue its forward defense strategy while encouraging its regional partners to do more for their own defense. Like America, Australia had a difficult time maintaining public support for military intervention in Southeast Asia; forward defense no longer meant “forward deployment.” Instead, Australian diplomats should enlist those countries “to help themselves,” constructing a better regional defense mechanism. Nevertheless, the Cabinet Ministers believed “that Australian military involvement in Asia was a necessary quid pro quo for the United States’

commitment to Australia’s security under ANZUS.” As Gorton put it in May 1969, Australia would go on waltzing with America.388

U.S. engagement in the Pacific remained vital to Australia’s and New Zealand’s national interest, and America’s uncertain Vietnam policy and domestic situation worried Pacific Commonwealth leaders. New Zealand Prime Minister Keith Holyoake summed up the situation in January, “Looking at the world’s political scene from the point of view of New Zealand,…the prospects for 1969 and the years ahead appeared full of trouble with few encouraging signs of durable peace, and that everyone must feel a sense of frustration and perhaps some puzzlement.” Although he expected continued U.S. involvement in the region, he noted Commonwealth members should help encourage American resolve. Prime Minister Gorton was more nervous. Gorton told the British Prime Minister that his government was “apprehensive of an American ‘sell out’ over Vietnam in the Paris talks….if the United States sold out their Vietnamese allies, the consequences for South East Asia could be disastrous.” With the change in the White House, Australia would need to remind Washington of South Vietnam’s importance and convey Australian attitudes on negotiations and presumed withdrawals to the new administration. Until consultations cleared up American intentions, officials in Canberra and Wellington remained nervous about de-Americanization, whether in Vietnam or region-wide.389


389 Minutes of Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ second meeting, “World Political Situation and Trends,” 1/7/1969, FCO 24/595, PRO; “Record of a conversation between the Prime Minister [Wilson] and the Prime Minister of Australia at a Luncheon at No. 10 Downing Street at 1.15 p.m. on Tuesday, January 7, 1969,” FCO 15/1056, PRO; and letter, Keith Waller (Washington, D.C.), 1/24/1969, Item 555489 USA—Relations with Australia—Defence—General, A1838, NAA.
British policymakers also followed the situations in the United States and Vietnam but better understood the dynamics at work and were less fearful of an American sellout. They appreciated the domestic pressures without grossly overestimating their probable effects, though they feared 1969’s social tumult and congressional difficulties would exceed that of 1968. De-Americanization seemed certain in Vietnam (as well as worldwide), but Richard Nixon would not abandon U.S. commitments willingly. In short, Congress and the American public would prove difficult but not insurmountable challenges to presidential leadership and internationalism.

President Lyndon Johnson’s unconditional bombing halt allowed British diplomats and leaders to voice greater support for the American cause in South Vietnam. Britain had disapproved of LBJ’s expanding commitment and Americanization of the war, and as late as October 1968, the Cabinet considered completely dissociating itself from American policy there. With the turn toward negotiations, British officials increasingly, though privately, backed U.S. efforts, encouraged America to persevere, and urged reconciliation between Saigon and Washington. The beginning of talks and bombing halt had eased their domestic situation. London had two large antiwar protests in 1968 with the October 27 demonstration drawing around one hundred thousand protesters. As America began de-escalating the war, the British antiwar movement dissipated, easing Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s criticism from the left. So long as the president remained committed to negotiations and refrained from bombing North Vietnam, Britain could stand with America and South Vietnam. As Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart presciently stated to LBJ,

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“[The] British fully supported the President’s position, but they would have difficulty if the Americans abandoned it without warning.” De-escalation had bought British goodwill.391

Given this tentative support and British interests worldwide, the Brits had been following Richard Nixon’s pronouncements as a candidate to ascertain the direction of his foreign policy and the character of his White House. By July 1968, their analysts recognized Nixon’s de-Americanization strategy. Trying to predict his presidential policies, one such memo argued, “Mr. Nixon is unlikely to keep American troops overseas unless he is absolutely convinced they are necessary.” The paper continued, “Throughout the world Mr. Nixon will expect America’s friends and allies to do more to stand on their feet.” European reductions seemed likely, but Nixon would otherwise stand by NATO. After the election, U.S. Senator Jacob Javits (R-NY) acted as Nixon’s liaison with Europe and confirmed this global de-Americanization. Javits explained to Prime Minister Wilson that Nixon would not continue LBJ’s style of “excessively ‘interventionist’” foreign policies but only intervene if the regions or nations themselves desired it and contributed their share. Javits continued, “If the countries of the area showed no such disposition, or were reluctant to pull their weight, then the Nixon administration would not be disposed to pull their chestnuts out of the fire.” Put simply, Javits said “mutuality and reciprocity” would characterize Nixon’s foreign policy.392


392 Memo, C.H.D. Everett, 7/19/1968, FCO 7/747, PRO; background, unknown author and dates, FCO 63/331, PRO; transcript of meeting between Senator J. Javits and Prime Minister Wilson, 11/18/1968, PREM 13/3020, PRO.
Ambassador Patrick Dean agreed with these assessments and expected Nixon to maintain close relations with the United Kingdom. Back in August with Nixon’s election looking increasingly certain, Dean argued Whitehall should begin warming up to the candidate. Dean cabled, “Sooner or later we have got to try, I think, to see Nixon with a bit more sympathy and understanding. No one can pretend that he is a particularly appealing Presidential probability or that his character limitations will have wholly changed over the last half decade. All the same, the Nixon of 1968 is not, as one newspaper has said, demonic.” Instead, Dean predicted Nixon would be an intelligent and able president facing a difficult situation in Vietnam and at home.393

As for Vietnam, British officials realized that the entirety of Nixon’s comments on Vietnam “adds up to very little.” Nixon had retained flexibility during the campaign, though de-Americanization seemed certain. Ending the Vietnam War would be Nixon’s first priority as president, and most officials believed he would not be tougher in prosecuting the war than LBJ. An anonymous paper summarized Nixon’s presumed goals: “to de-escalate the U.S. effort in Vietnam, to withdraw as many troops as possible in the next few years, and to produce a situation on the ground in which the Vietnamese, North and South, can decide on the future of their own country and re-unite it or not as they please.” Nixon would reduce hostilities in South Vietnam, particularly by removing U.S. soldiers, while giving the South Vietnamese the freedom to decide their future free from Northern aggression.394

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393 Pat Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, “Mr. Richard Nixon’s Forked Tail,” 8/24/1968, FCO 7/747, PRO.
394 Memo, P.W. Heap, “Mr. Nixon’s Views on Vietnam,” 11/8/1968, FCO 15/1040, PRO; background, unknown author and dates, FCO 63/331, PRO.
Due to American political and military considerations, British diplomats assumed the United States would not restart the bombing and interdiction campaigns against North Vietnam, but Nixon and Kissinger’s private statements left them wondering. As Whitehall understood it, Nixon was hinting that “if the Paris negotiations broke down he would try to use American power ‘more effectively.’ We do not know how, in practice, he would implement such a policy.” The British ambassador in Saigon, C.M. MacLehose, made a good guess of the plans the Nixon White House might consider. He argued that the strategic B-52 bomber was a powerful weapon the Americans might unleash against North Vietnam but posited that even it was susceptible to antiaircraft fire. He believed each loss over the North would incur a political cost stateside. MacLehose further argued that if the president chose to resume bombing, the military would likely demand a full-scale campaign using these bombers to strike the port at Haiphong as well as the supply lines running out of China. Soon after MacLehose sent this cable, Kissinger was indeed intimating to British officials that coercive diplomacy and wild threats would be an integral part of Nixon’s strategy to end the war.395

Yet, MacLehose had also noted, “As time passes I fear that the credibility of the American threat to renew the bombing campaign will diminish.”396 World and American opinion had accepted negotiations and the bombing halt as givens, making it much more difficult to restart them. Although President Johnson had considered doing so and always

395 Background, unknown author and dates, FCO 63/331, PRO; dispatch, Ambassador in Viet-Nam C.M. MacLehose to Foreign Office, 12/10/1968, FCO 15/1083, PRO; and notes, A.M. Palliser, “Notes on a Conversation with Dr. Henry Kissinger in New York on Friday, December 20, 1968,” 12/23/1968, PREM 13/2097, PRO.

396 Dispatch, Ambassador in Viet-Nam C.M. MacLehose to Foreign Office, 12/10/1968, FCO 15/1083, PRO.
maintained the president could resume them if he felt Hanoi was taking advantage of the halt, most believed Nixon would incite significant dissent if he did so. Thus, the popular belief that the bombing halt was permanent along with the uncertain political and social situation in America reduced the credibility of any threat against North Vietnam.

From the British perspective, Nixon’s domestic environment looked every bit as challenging as the situation in Indochina. A resurgent Congress appeared a certain threat to America’s commitments worldwide and Nixon’s statesmanship. Pat Dean speculated, “I fear that, sincerely and ably as Mr. Nixon may seek to work with its leaders, Congress may from the beginning offer him precious little trust or encouragement.” Dean said the same about America’s youth. He anticipated ongoing campus dissent in the coming year and argued that if white and black dissidents coalesced, this development “would shake the fabric of society.” Another British official saw the same phenomenon. Nixon’s political support was weakest in cities, which was unfortunately “where the potential for dissent and disorder is greatest.” And as always, foreign events constantly threatened to enflame these tensions. The author continued, “If [Nixon] can arrange withdrawal with a reasonable degree of honour, reconciliation at home will be attainable. But failure in Viet Nam and the big stick in the American cities would be a prescription for disaster.”

Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird had their work cut out for them then. Unrest at home and an increasingly hostile Congress threatened to undermine the domestic basis necessary for an active foreign policy. De-Americanization, in Vietnam and elsewhere, was a
prescription for national maladies but it blurred the line between domestic and foreign policy. Was de-Americanization the means to sustaining support at home for U.S. commitments abroad? Or was it a symptom of an incurable social illness? Would the American people demand greater and greater reductions, precipitating South Vietnam’s fall and the erosion of U.S. deterrent forces worldwide?

Because of America’s internal difficulties, its allies anticipated Vietnamization and the Nixon Doctrine months before the Nixon administration even began fleshing out these ideas. They saw the writing on the wall even as President Johnson refused to countenance de-Americanization and Nixon spent the transition vacillating between radically escalating the Vietnam War or following through with his campaign promise to de-Americanize it. As Nixon entered the White House, allied uncertainty over American intentions remained high. So too was Nixon’s indecision over Vietnam strategy.
7. Nixon & Kissinger:  
The Will to Win

“There is not going to be any de-escalation….We are just going to keep giving word to Wheeler to knock hell out of them.” ~Richard Nixon

“The more reasonable we sound, the worst off we are. We should have the option open that we might go back to the Dulles position [of nuclear brinkmanship].” ~Henry Kissinger

In his January 20, 1969, inaugural address, Richard Nixon declared, “We are caught in war, wanting peace. We are torn by division, wanting unity….We see tasks that need doing, waiting for hands to do them.” The thirty-seventh president added, “I shall consecrate my Office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon to the cause of peace among nations.” He cautioned America’s enemies not to be tempted by America’s divisions and apparent weakness and promised to pursue a compassionate, understanding, and healing peace, “not victory over any other people.” He intended this lofty rhetoric to show his determination while giving the people “more than empty hope” that peace in Vietnam was attainable and forthcoming. Nixon had won the freedom to chart his own course, to be the statesman and “peacemaker” of his aspirations. He intended to succeed where others had failed.

As the Nixon administration came together in January, it reflected few of these ideals. First, his advisors were as divided over Vietnam as was the rest of the country. Secretary of State William Rogers and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird assessed the

398 Both quotes from Telcon, RN and HAK, 6:25-7:10 p.m., 3/8/1969, HAK Telcons 1:4, RNPLM.
399 Memo on inaugural address, Ray Price to RN, 1/12/1969, PPS 208:103:5, RNLBF.
domestic situation and urged the president to de-escalate the war—the former through diplomatic compromise and negotiations, the latter through progressive de-Americanization. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger sharply disagreed, arguing credible threats and increased military pressure would compel Hanoi to settle. The new administration was as fractured as its predecessor.

Second, for a man who had spoken and thought so much about Indochina, Nixon entered the White House without a set plan to end the war, honorably or otherwise. He had a three-pronged international strategy, but its parts contradicted one another, producing more uncertainty and indecision. Nixon would escalate the war in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos while threatening to resume the bombing in North Vietnam in order to convince Hanoi of his determination. Nixon would attempt to bind Vietnam to other Cold War issues to encourage North Vietnam’s great-power patrons, the Soviets and Chinese, to put increased pressure on Hanoi to settle. And Nixon would neutralize domestic antiwar sentiment by pursuing negotiations and beginning troop withdrawals. Thus, escalation, linkage, and de-Americanization were the three incompatible components. Escalation, particularly bombing outside of South Vietnam, threatened the fragile domestic order. It would also push the Communist nations closer together as neither the Soviets nor the Chinese could reasonably abandon Hanoi in the midst of an American onslaught. Conversely, de-escalation would undermine any threats, lend credence to the conclusion that the home front dictated an American exit, and encourage further North Vietnamese intransigence. Only the greatest of statesmen could pull it off. As for Nixon,
the strategy produced conflicting impulses. As NSC aide Roger Morris concluded, “The dominant quality of Nixon’s first official responses to the war was indecision.”

Finally, Nixon’s campaign and inaugural promises of peace would, by the nature of his goals and North Vietnamese persistence, prove unattainable. Historian Lien-Hang Nguyen has rightly contended, “Elected on the promise of extricating the United States from Vietnam, Nixon spent his first term waging war on all fronts in order to prolong the conflict in Vietnam in hopes of winning ultimate victory.” Winning meant preserving non-communist South Vietnam, not for a decent interval but in perpetuity. Victory was a predilection he shared with his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger.

Together, Nixon and Kissinger spent their first months in office devising ways to hammer Communist forces to achieve a swift, negotiated end to the war. Given the waning public support and potential for explosive unrest, they assumed they had at most a few months to press the allied advantage and compel Hanoi to settle. Thereafter, they would have to begin de-escalating the war despite the diplomatic consequences. This chapter follows their efforts through mid-April as they steadily escalated and expanded the war, first within South Vietnam, then in Cambodia and Laos. By April, they were threatening Hanoi’s destruction and preparing contingency plans to this end. Although the pair had criticized Democratic administrations for their graduated response in Indochina, they were now slowly expanding the war out of the same fear of a public backlash, hoping Hanoi

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402 That said, despite much historiographic literature to the contrary (cf. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 149), Richard Nixon did not reverse LBJ’s trend toward de-escalation. No such trend existed as Johnson retained the option of resuming air campaigns against North Vietnamese and effectively vetoed withdrawal planning. Johnson had merely capped the war effort; progressive de-escalation, especially de-Americanization, remained elusive.
would get the message before they had to take tougher measures. But time seemed to be running out for these mad schemes. After April, Kissinger’s contingency plans directly competed with Laird’s Vietnamization.

Two paths lay before the Nixon administration: progressive de-escalation or an expanded conflict. Nixon and Kissinger chose an escalated war for an elusive peace. Fittingly, a British diplomat in Saigon reported, “In Viet-Nam 1969 is generally known as the year of the chicken and the year of peace. A different view is however taken by Hong Kong’s leading fortune teller, Wong Kim-Ti, who with the help of a tortoise, and three Chinese coins has predicted that the war in Viet-Nam will continue in 1969. You pays your money.”

**No Time Left You**

“No time left for you,” sang Canadian rockers The Guess Who in 1969, and it was a fitting description of Nixon and Kissinger’s reading of the domestic mood. From the onset, the White House heavily monitored domestic opinion, and Nixon recognized that although only a small number of radicals were advocating an immediate, unilateral withdrawal, the perceived erosion of domestic support limited his options. In early 1969, Nixon and Kissinger concluded that public support for the war would continue its inexorable decline, steadily eroding American credibility in the Paris negotiations while making escalation less and less politically palpable. Indeed, “time,” or the lack thereof, was a constant theme in their thoughts, conversations, and memos. The pair reasoned that

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1969 would have to be the decisive year—their one opportunity to threaten Hanoi with destruction and perhaps still have the political support at home to carry it out.footnote{404}

Every administration official understood the difficult state of U.S. public opinion and the possibility of renewed unrest, but not every policymaker shared Nixon and Kissinger’s conclusion. The home front’s critical state 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 Rogers, “All of us here 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.”footnote{405} Numerous officials argued that this pressure not only prevented escalation, it dictated de-escalation. They concluded that unless Nixon moved quickly on the war, Americans would demand a precipitate U.S. exit.

In actuality, domestic support for the war was holding relatively steady. Gallup found 52 percent of Americans believed U.S. intervention had been a mistake, which was down six points from October 1968. Moreover, this hindsight did not translate into a desire to cut and run. Less than a fifth of those polled wanted an immediate end to the war regardless of the consequences. The vast majority wanted the president to find some way to end the war honorably: 32 percent backed escalation, 26 percent favored some gradual de-Americanization, and 19 percent would have the war continue as it was. Fifty-seven percent wanted monthly U.S. reductions but a solid majority opposed any policy that would result in South Vietnam’s fall. Thus, the Nixon administration’s fear of a faltering home


front was a matter of perception rather than reality. Based on the deterioration that had followed the 1968 Tet Offensive, officials projected that the downward trend would continue. This perception gave rise to the institutional beliefs that policymakers were running out of time and that some change in Vietnam strategy was necessary. Nixon made this point at the first NSC meeting, stating that while the United States should “hang on” in Vietnam, “the internal problem” at home made it “very difficult to continue without some change.”

The nature of that change became the center of administration debate. At issue was whether the better course was to escalate the war to achieve a favorable settlement quickly, risking unrest but ending the war before domestic support gave out, or to gradually de-escalate the conflict to alleviate discontent and prolong general support. Kissinger and the hawks favored the former whereas the moderates and doves believed immediate de-escalation was necessary to stave off a domestic disaster.

Nixon and Kissinger acted as if the clock was winding down quickly and that this trend justified escalation. Nixon began his first term convinced that public patience was limited and running out. He assumed that an increasing number of Americans found escalation upsetting. Bombing North Vietnam would exacerbate social tensions, provoke antiwar dissent, and catalyze the public’s transformation into doves. Nixon explained to recalcitrant hawk Senator Barry Goldwater that “he didn’t think the American public would stand for an all-out military assault on North Vietnam. He said he was in a no-win

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situation.” But Nixon still held that only violent escalation would end the conflict in 1969. That being the case, Kissinger argued that Nixon should act now while the public was relatively quiescent and before the doves became the majority.\(^{407}\)

Hence, Nixon and Kissinger assessed the domestic situation and concluded the opposite of de-escalation advocates—the White House could never pacify the doves and that public and congressional support would continue to erode. Kissinger wrote Nixon, “While the domestic opposition to the war which was again increasing quieted down after January 20, there is little question that domestic controversy will begin to mount, certainly within a few months.” Kissinger argued meaningful talks would take considerable time “and time is not on our side.” He recognized that troop reductions on the order of seventy-five thousand men “would buy us a considerable amount of time at home,” but any withdrawal announcement needed to come after Nixon had impressed the Communists with his resolve. Otherwise, Hanoi would interpret the reduction as proof of America’s fading will. Ending Nixon’s political honeymoon early in order to take decisive military action made more sense to Kissinger. As he explained to Nixon’s Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman,

> What will determine the President’s position in public opinion will be whether the war is wound up 15 months from now. If it isn’t, having received a favorable editorial now will do him no good; if it is, having been clobbered by the NY Times this week won’t harm him.

Nixon agreed, telling the Cabinet in January that “he was very much aware of the domestic issues but that he would rather take the heat now and achieve a sound settlement subsequently.” The United States had to achieve peace with honor before the home front

\(^{407}\) Johns, _Vietnam’s Second Front_, 241-242; and Kimball, _Nixon’s Vietnam War_, 141-142.
collapsed even if that meant taking military measures that would accelerate this

Nixon’s tentative de-Americanization fit into this larger Vietnam strategy. Nixon had been adamant about the need to build up indigenous forces while avoiding U.S. troop commitments for over a decade. In 1968, he campaigned and in part won election on his de-Americanization strategy. But as the Vietnam problem confronted him in early 1969, withdrawing soldiers was a matter of priorities. Officials predicted popular support for the war would continue to deteriorate, necessitating a change in strategy, yet Nixon believed he could not abandon South Vietnam. Nixon instead hoped to escalate the war and achieve an honorable settlement before public patience ran out. The president understood what NSC staffer John Holdridge noted in a January briefing paper: America’s military presence in South Vietnam was “the principal bargaining element on the Allied side.”\footnote{Memo, John Holdridge, 1/23/1969, folder “Briefing Papers 1969-1970,” Box 27, E-5408, RG 59, NAI.} And indeed, complete unilateral U.S. withdrawal was Hanoi’s principal demand. An early reduction, while good for the body politic, diminished U.S. leverage whereas ramping up the war improved their position and offered the hope of compelling North Vietnamese capitulation. In short, reductions would occur after Nixon had proven his resolve and laid the groundwork for what he hoped would be lasting peace. Until then, Nixon and Kissinger would pursue an expanded and escalated war in Indochina.

Administration doves believed this escalation would do little to improve the situation in Vietnam and would only exacerbate America’s internal tensions. De-escalation was the safe and necessary course. There were three paths toward de-escalation: negotiations, easing the allied offensive in South Vietnam, and de-Americanization. Rogers hoped early concessions would start productive talks with Hanoi and so forwarded dovish State Department proposals to the White House. Nixon understood the political value of continuing public talks, but apart from North Vietnamese capitulation they were antithetical to his objective of securing the Republic of Vietnam’s future. Stale negotiations could sustain public support for only so long.410

Other key figures pressed Nixon to reduce the intensity of the fighting in South Vietnam. The American head of the Paris 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 public support and thereby bettering the U.S. negotiating position. Lodge asserted that if by the following August military deaths were still at their current 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 tactics 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. President Nixon ignored this advice as he had already authorized the opposite course, ordering the military to increase the pressure on the enemy.\footnote{Letter, Lodge to RN, 2/12/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:65-66; and memo, RN to HAK, 2/1/1969, NSC 136:1, RNPLM.}

Progressively removing American soldiers was a third way of de-escalating the conflict to better the situation at home. Politicians, journalists, and policymakers had discussed de-Americanization for nearly a year, but no one had turned this talk into a concrete policy. At the first NSC meeting, Nixon had tentatively agreed to an early reduction, but as January turned into February, the president did nothing to formalize or develop a plan to reduce the numbers of U.S. troops in Vietnam. Its political necessity was clear, though its execution remained uncertain. As America’s former chief negotiator at the Paris peace talks, W. Averell Harriman reminded Washington officials, “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.”\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation between Rogers Harriman, 1/21/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:4.}

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. Laird believed “public opinion” was a ticking “time bomb” in
early 1969. “We had to get with it,” Laird affirmed. “The whole country was fed up with this [war].”\footnote{Interviews of Laird by Maurice Matloff and Alfred Goldberg, September 2 and October 29, 1986, folder “Laird-Oral History Interviews (1-2),” Box D8, LP, GFL.}

Certainly, administration officials agreed on this point. There was little or no time to continue America’s Vietnam War at the current level of hostilities and U.S. participation. But the government remained divided over whether or not the White House should escalate the war to achieve victory before public patience finally gave out or if domestic circumstances dictated no other course but immediate de-escalation.

**Starting Nixon’s Vietnam War**

As the Nixon administration began, division rather than unity characterized their actions. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers pushed de-escalation with the former working independently and fervently on a de-Americanization program. Meanwhile, Nixon and Kissinger took the hard line, planning decisive escalation. From the beginning, Kissinger attempted to consolidate his institutional power while distracting the bureaucrats in order to preserve Nixon’s freedom to act decisively. Only domestic politics, public opinion, bureaucratic infighting, and worries over social unrest seemed to restrain their militant schemes.

Nixon’s first National Security Council meeting highlighted these divisions as well as the fact that for Nixon, unilateral withdrawal existed as a coda to tougher measures and hard bargaining. CIA director Richard Helms gave the day’s first briefing, which reflected the budding optimism that followed last year’s Tet Offensive. 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 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.” These favorable military reports confirmed the president’s belief he could end the war that year. Thereafter, Nixon voiced his wildly confident conviction that it would take just “six months of strong military action” to soften the Hanoi’s negotiating position,” and he requested copies of contingency plans for resuming the Northern bombing. Nevertheless, Nixon conceded, “We do have the internal problem in the U.S. and it will be very difficult without some change.”

After listening to Nixon’s concerns over the American public accepting a negotiated settlement with North Vietnam, Secretary of State 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 still wanted six months of hard fighting, 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

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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.” Until then, American forces would “continue to punish the enemy.”

Henry Kissinger worked closely with the president on these punitive measures, but he also took opportunities in January to distract the government bureaucracies and consolidate his institutional power. According to Roger Morris (and consistent with Kissinger’s prolific writing), 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.” The NSC meeting on January 25 confirmed Kissinger’s doubts. His military aide, Alexander Haig, recalled Kissinger’s reaction to hearing Cabinet officials discuss foreign policy, “‘Why did Nixon hire these guys?’ he asked, throwing up his hands in mock despair. ‘Defense is opposed to the use of force; State is obsessed by compromise. They’ll sabotage everything the President tells me he wants to do in foreign policy.’” Nixon and Kissinger could only develop an aggressive, statesman-like foreign policy when the bureaucrats left them alone.

Kissinger’s first opportunity to distract policymakers came when one author of the pre-inaugural RAND paper on Vietnam strategy suggested Kissinger “put a series of

416 Ibid., 53-54
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. Forcing these groups to answer a detailed questionnaire would keep them from meddling with Nixon and Kissinger’s real efforts to end the war. Explaining his reasoning to an aide, Kissinger declared with some exaggeration, “I’m tying up the bureaucracy for a year and buying time for the new president.”

Both Kissinger and 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, National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM 1) consisted of several pages of detailed questions certain to incite bureaucratic warfare between hawks and doves. In the meantime, Kissinger could work on negotiating a settlement favorable to the United States and South Vietnam.

To this end, Kissinger began taking over Secretary Rogers’s role as chief U.S. diplomat. In late January, Kissinger met privately with South Vietnamese ambassador Bui Diem to discuss the Paris talks and American intentions. News of their discussion alarmed State officials. Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy sent a private note to Rogers warning the secretary that unless he put an abrupt stop to these contacts, Kissinger would

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jeopardize Rogers’s “personal and institutional position.” Given an alternative path to
the president, foreign ambassadors could “whipsaw” the United States by surveying both
the State Department and the White House to find the easiest inroad to pressure American
policy. More likely, the White House could use Kissinger’s independence to provide a
different “slant” on diplomatic matters, subverting State’s purview and perhaps cutting
them out completely. Bundy recognized this threat and sounded the alarm. Yet, Kissinger
continued to aggrandize his power, and with Nixon, planned the very escalation and
expansion of the war the bureaucrats found unfathomable.

On January 30, Kissinger met with Laird and Wheeler to discuss various
contingency plans for increasing the military pressure on the North Vietnamese.
Recognizing the political danger of resuming the air war over the North, Kissinger “asked
what could be done in South Vietnam which could convey to the North that there is a new
firm hand at the helm.” Wheeler recommended pursuing attacking NVA and NLF units
into Cambodia as they retreated. Wheeler further suggested that since attacking North
Vietnam was politically off limits, the administration should strike enemy forces and
logistical centers in Cambodia. Laird disagreed and cautioned that the American people
were demanding de-escalation and that military action in Cambodia “would represent a
difficult political problem.” Nixon and Kissinger shunned Laird’s advice.

420 Bundy considered this message so sensitive that he made no carbon copies.
421 Memo, HAK to Rogers, 1/28/1969, folder “Miscellaneous Hold,” Box 1, E-5439, RG 59, NAI;
and memo, William Bundy to Rogers, 1/29/1969, folder “Miscellaneous Hold,” Box 1, E-5439, RG 59, NAI.
422 Memorandum of meeting between HAK, Laird, and Wheeler, 1/30/1969, FRUS, 1969-1976,
6:44-46; and HAK, WHY, 241.
On February 1, Nixon ordered General Wheeler to try to find “new ways to increase the pressure militarily without going to the point that we break off negotiations.” South Vietnamese and U.S. forces would have to keep the heat on the enemy in the South. With talks stalled in Paris, escalation in South Vietnam alone appeared increasingly unable to end the war.\(^\text{423}\)

As Wheeler had recommended, Nixon and Kissinger began planning to bomb Cambodia as part of their strategy. They hoped another Tet offensive or Communists rocket attacks on Saigon would occur to justify the bombing publicly but also considered blaming any bombing across the Cambodian border on unintended navigational error. Regardless, they believed this bombing would signal U.S. determination to Hanoi while applying military pressure on them to settle the war. On February 19, Nixon authorized preparations for a Cambodian bombing campaign to occur later that month. On the 22\(^{nd}\), North Vietnam launched a mini-Tet offensive, which President Nixon saw as a “deliberate test” to ascertain his mettle as a leader. With the military and Kissinger urging him to attack, Nixon all but authorized an immediate air campaign.\(^\text{424}\)

Not for the last time, Laird counseled moderation and reminded the president of the domestic consequences of any rash escalation. Laird noted his willingness to execute the president’s orders but warned that the public would not accept this escalation. Instead, Nixon’s critics “would then create, or attempt to create, difficulty for you and for all of us through contacts in the Congress and in the press.” Moreover, the Washington

\(^{423}\) Memo attached to HAK memo to Laird, RN to HAK, 2/1/1969, folder “Sec Def Correspondence-Southeast Asia (1),” Box D11, LP, GFL; and memo, RN to HAK, 2/1/1969, NSC 136:1, RNPLM.

establishment was too well aware of the Cambodian option to believe it was an accident. As a former hawk, Laird appreciated the tactical benefits of hitting Communist sanctuaries and supply lines in Cambodia but counseled Nixon to wait until North Vietnamese violence justified retaliation. Nixon heeded his advice and postponed the operation.  

Also weighing on Nixon was his concurrent European trip and his image as an international statesman. Drawing on the popular view that LBJ’s land war in Asia had weakened NATO and left Europeans feeling ignored, Nixon had campaigned on revitalizing the Atlantic alliance and prioritizing European concerns. For his first trip abroad, Nixon chose Europe to confirm this commitment and solicit European heads’ advice (or at least mute their criticism) on America’s Vietnam War. Critically, this trip revealed Kissinger’s growing influence and Nixon’s willingness to enlist British support for his militant policies.

Nixon viewed his European tour as an opportunity to build legitimacy at home and stave off any criticism of his Vietnam policies, especially should he escalate and expand the war. White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman noted in his diary that the president wanted the trip to portray “Nixon as the leader” to foreign dignitaries and American audiences alike. Nixon had long burnished his political reputation with trips overseas; traveling aboard Air Force One only increased his stature. At the same time, Nixon worried antiwar protests abroad would mar this stately image.

427 Safire, Before the Fall, 121; Haldeman, Haldeman Diaries, 34; and HAK, WHY, 73-74.
As worrisome would be public criticism of his war efforts by allied leaders. British and French condemnation of the war’s Americanization had a ripple effect in the United States, giving legitimacy to domestic critics. President Johnson’s acceptance of negotiations and the accompanying bombing halt had secured general reprieve from this censure. A humbled, peace-seeking America was a sympathetic case. Nixon sought to appeal to this empathy and secure, if not European leaders’ avowed support for his Vietnam policies, at least a pledge to keep any differences private.  

By early February, British analysts recognized Henry Kissinger as Nixon’s partner in power. Ambassador Patrick Dean believed Nixon’s revitalized NSC structure was “to show the country that his Administration is operating as a team” and thus “part of the process of healing the division of the country.” Yet as a practical consequence, this emphasis along with Rogers’s departmental paralysis left Kissinger rather than the State Department in charge of foreign policy. Dean concluded, “We may well find most of the ideas in the field of international policy will emanate from the White House and that the job of the State Department will be, not to initiate policy but rather to elaborate and to execute it.” Other Britons agreed. Kissinger gleefully told another British diplomat “that there is no way in which a piece of paper can reach the President from the State Department, or indeed the Secretary of State personally, without going through [him].” Nonetheless, he also observed that Kissinger appeared inundated and overwhelmed by all the position papers he had demanded via the NSC apparatus and that the Washington bureaucratic machine remained quite capable of modifying or hindering Nixon and Kissinger’s policies.

428 Talking Papers on European Trip, NSC 442:2, RNPLM; and Talking Paper for European Trip, “UK—General Talking Points,” NSC 442:7, RNPLM.
As for Vietnam, British policymakers believed America’s social unrest as well as urban and racial problems meant Nixon “must end or drastically reduce the level of the Viet Nam war if sufficient resources are to be available to tackle” these internal problems. Hence, they assumed Nixon would de-Americanize the war but wondered if Kissinger would sway him to take “tough, (e.g. possibly military), measures” to get an acceptable settlement.\(^\text{429}\)

With Kissinger and Nixon indeed planning tougher measures, Nixon raised the subject of renewed bombing rather than de-Americanization when he met with Prime Minister Harold Wilson on February 24. Given the concurrent NVA offensive, Nixon admitted “that the ‘hard liners’ were inevitably pressing him…to resume the bombing of North Vietnam.” Doubting the efficacy of this bombing, Nixon said he would not yet heed the hawks. Instead, Nixon wanted to try secret talks with Hanoi, and if these led to an acceptable agreement, “he would be prepared to twist South Vietnamese arms fairly hard in seeking their acceptance of it.” But if the negotiations stalled and the Communist military activity continued, “then he might find himself obliged to respond, even if this entailed acceptance of responsibility for killing the talks.” Nixon, portraying himself as the determined peacemaker, would only use force as a last resort. Here, Prime Minister Wilson, who had consistently counseled moderation and given his early and strong support for negotiations and the bombing halt, broke with his past record. Wilson told Nixon that

should the talks break down and bombing resume, Her Majesty’s Government would support the United States.\textsuperscript{430}

The meeting marked a decisive shift in Wilson’s attitude toward the Vietnam War. Wilson had urged President Lyndon Johnson to pursue negotiations and halt the bombing over North Vietnam. When Johnson reluctantly adopted both policies, Wilson applauded U.S. actions even as the fighting continued. As a new president inheriting an unpopular war, Nixon warranted particular empathy, and Wilson had personal as well as strategic reasons for giving tentative approval for escalation of the war. Nixon played the part of the humble statesman well, drawing allied sympathy for America’s plight in Vietnam. Years later, Wilson still believed Nixon came to Europe to gather opinions before settling on a foreign policy course. Wilson remembered, “Above all he was there to listen.” Indeed, British diplomats on the Continent observed that Nixon’s humility and expressed desire to hear others’ advice rather than give his own endeared him to all European leaders.\textsuperscript{431}

Grand strategy also played a part as Britain more than ever needed the “special relationship”—that peculiar blend of affection, shared values and interests between Americans and Britons. Before Nixon’s tour, Whitehall argued that “while the United Kingdom is becoming less indispensable to American interests, the United States is as important to the United Kingdom as ever.” Britons still saw the Soviet Union as a military threat and believed only the United States could deter and protect the West from Soviet

\textsuperscript{430} Record of conversation, illegible author, 2/26/1969, FCO 15/1031, PRO.
\textsuperscript{431} Wilson, \textit{A Personal Record}, 620-621; and memo, Christopher Soames, “President Nixon’s Visit to Paris,” Paris 3/14/1969, FCO 33/533, PRO.
aggression. British policymakers also depended on access to American intelligence. All told, British leaders cherished the consultations and influence the “special relationship” afforded, and Wilson hoped to build rapport with Nixon. With British power and global presence receding, though, Americans acknowledged they wanted “little from them, other than support in the Middle East and Vietnam, and their cooperation in dealing with the Soviets.” Wilson and his advisors realized they had to guard their exchanges with the new president lest they risk losing their privileged access to the White House and hence their influence. They decided to tell the Americans when they disagreed with U.S. policy but keep any divisions private, minimizing public rebukes. In short, the “special relationship” could bolster both Nixon and Wilson’s standing as domestic and world leaders, but in regards to Nixon’s hawkish Vietnam policies, a reprieve from British criticism removed one international source of legitimacy for American doves.432

Overall, the meeting was an important moment in Anglo-American relations and the evolution of Nixon’s Vietnam policies. Wilson developed a sincere admiration for Nixon as a true statesman and gentleman.433 Based on this relationship and Wilson’s statements, Nixon concluded that Britain would support his decision to resume bombing North Vietnam. Nixon misunderstood how tentative this support was, but for the remainder of the year, he drew on this and other conversations with Wilson to prove to administration skeptics that his course was the right one.

433 RN, RV, 370-372.
That Nixon had chosen to discuss escalation rather than troop reductions testified to his focus on Kissinger’s violent schemes. On returning to Washington, Nixon and Kissinger’s contingency planning continued apace. Tough measures, first in Cambodia, then in North Vietnam, were ever more likely.

**March Madness**

Nixon and Kissinger could talk of peace and conciliation but they doubted de-escalation would benefit the negotiations. Compromise would never beget compromise with the North Vietnamese; America had to back its diplomacy with a realistic threat of force. After working with Kissinger on several occasions, Daniel Ellsberg observed, “Kissinger has a very strong ideological belief in the efficacy and legitimacy of the threat of violence as a tool of power.”

Reducing the military offensive would only diminish this vital instrument of foreign policy, and so in March, Nixon and Kissinger continued to rule out any diminution of the war.

Instead, they planned further escalation and expansion. Since military efforts in the South failed to produce results in Paris, Nixon authorized bombing Communist enclaves in Cambodia while Kissinger continued to review plans to threaten North Vietnam. With domestic support winding down, Nixon and Kissinger believed they were running out of time to prosecute the war effectively.

In response to Nixon’s January request, the Joint Chiefs provided contingency plans for actual or feigned offensives against North Vietnam as well as the supply lines in Laos and Cambodia. As Kissinger’s military aide Alexander Haig noted on March 2, they

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exceeded what the pair was asking for. The Joint Chiefs went so far as to include the possible use of nuclear weapons and an invasion of North Vietnam as a part of Nixon’s escalatory tactics. To break North Vietnamese stubbornness, they also suggested “deception operations” to “create fear in the Hanoi leadership that the United States is preparing to undertake new highly damaging military actions.” Upon reviewing these alternatives, Kissinger agreed with Laird that such actions were too risky domestically and internationally at that time. The military had the right idea, though. Subtle moves implying a credible threat of escalation might cow Hanoi without inciting a media or public backlash. Yet, plans to expand the war in Cambodia were gaining traction once again despite pleas for moderation.435

Nixon had merely postponed, not canceled the operation, and Secretary Rogers was marshaling his influence and departmental power to stay the president’s hand. Rogers warned that escalation would “shorten the period of full public support for the whole war effort” and “throw large and significant segments of public and congressional opinion into a critical and impatient posture.” Patience would stabilize domestic support and perhaps even help the administration build a case for future action. Rogers also hoped for a breakthrough in Paris. Circumventing presidential authority, Rogers told Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on March 8 that the United States was willing to discuss political and military issues simultaneously and that private talks could involve the Saigon regime and NLF. Nixon had conceded neither point. He refused to countenance political

negotiations until North Vietnam had vacated South Vietnamese territory or take any action that would lend the NLF legitimacy. Kissinger fumed that Rogers had ruined the opportunity for the administration to “take [the] hard line” with the Communists and that Nixon should boot Rogers up to the Supreme Court. Nixon disregarded Rogers’s concerns, choosing to cut out his Secretary of State and pursue Kissinger’s militant strategy.436

As March conversations and memoranda make clear, Nixon and Kissinger opposed de-escalation. They believed the war had turned in America’s favor and that they should press the advantage. In a March 8 memo, 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 operations in South Vietnam. He 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.” Additionally, reduced fighting would increase domestic pressure to bring the apparently superfluous troops home. Having railed against any immediate de-escalation, Kissinger assured the president that he was working on a “game plan.” Nixon concurred with his National Security Advisor, “There is not going to be any de-escalation….We are just going to keep giving word to Wheeler to knock hell out of them.” Wheeler gladly obliged, submitting plans in mid-March to mine Haiphong harbor and recommending any mining operation be part of a larger, sustained air campaign against North Vietnam. Instead of planning progressive de-escalation and de-

Americanization, Nixon and Kissinger discussed how to best threaten and steadily increase the military pressure against Hanoi, beginning in Cambodia.\(^{437}\)

Bombing Cambodia was a means of punishing the North for the ongoing offensive, signaling the Soviets that the White House was serious about ending the war, and improving the situation in South Vietnam (in that order). Nixon thought it was too soon into his term to end the honeymoon by striking the North, but covertly hitting Communist forces and depots in Cambodia would demonstrate what awaited Hanoi if they dithered in Paris, especially if the bombing preceded the beginning of secret private talks between the U.S. and North Vietnamese delegation. Thus, if Hanoi continued its Southern offensive and intransigence in Paris, Nixon told Kissinger, “We’ll crack the North and crack it good.”\(^{438}\)

The element of madness increasingly crept into these conversations and calculations. Kissinger argued, “When you have a weak poker hand, you shouldn’t be too cautious….We shouldn’t set [sic] here and do nothing.” He further told Nixon, “The more reasonable we sound, the worst off we are. We should have the option open that we might go back to the Dulles position [of nuclear brinkmanship].” Wild threats of North Vietnam’s destruction made credible by a dramatic show of force in Cambodia would surely compel Hanoi’s capitulation and convince the Soviets of Nixon’s determination.\(^{439}\)


Nixon and Kissinger hoped to induce Moscow’s cooperation in ending the Vietnam War and believed linking the conflict to global Soviet interests might encourage this development. Nixon consistently placed the Vietnam War in the broader Cold War context. He believed that without Sino-Soviet aid and diplomatic support the North Vietnamese would cease their conquest of South Vietnam. In 1968, Nixon campaigned on his ability to enlist the Communist great powers in ending the Vietnam War. As with most of Nixon’s campaign pledges, he was vague on specifics. Nevertheless, the Soviets did want a more stable world and better relations with the United States, especially as conflict erupted along the Ussuri River between the Soviets and Chinese in March 1969. The Sino-Soviet split in turn left both parties seeking rapprochement with America, and Nixon and Kissinger hoped that triangular diplomacy and linkage would exploit these internal Communist tensions and better enable them to link Vietnam to global issues. Nixon and Kissinger saw this rapprochement, or détente, as a means of securing the U.S. Cold War goal of containing Communism worldwide through diplomacy rather than military confrontation. America could give on issues like nuclear superiority, anti-ballistic missile defense, or diplomatic relations with China, if the Communists would reciprocate by helping end the Vietnam War.440

Détente was the carrot, and playing the mad president was the stick. Again cutting Rogers out of the diplomatic loop, Kissinger warned Dobrynin in late February that Nixon would “have to respond very strongly” to a North Vietnamese offensive in the South. Now that Hanoi had justified American escalation, Nixon should act to convince Moscow and

440 Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, 50-51; Whalen, Catch the Falling Flag, 287-290; and Hanhimaki, Flawed Architect, 40-44.
Hanoi alike by striking into Cambodia. Although unsure how the Soviets could coerce the Vietnamese, Kissinger wrote, “We must worry the Soviets about the possibility that we are losing our patience and may get out of control.” Establishing a pattern that would endure throughout 1969, Kissinger and Nixon conveyed threats of radical escalation to the Soviets, vainly hoping Moscow would choose détente over their allies in Vietnam.441

Finally, Nixon and Kissinger believed bombing Cambodia would improve the situation in South Vietnam, consolidating 1968’s military gains. Since the early sixties, Cambodia had served as an NVA staging and supply area as well as a sanctuary for retreating Communist forces. With the Ho Chi Minh Trail running through it, the country had become a key conduit of men and materiel. Summarizing its strategic significance, Lien-Hang Nguyen noted, “By 1965, North Vietnam’s ability to wage war in the South depended heavily on these infiltration routes over land and sea that cut through not only Laos but Cambodia as well.”442 Hence, the U.S. military had long urged Washington to expand the war into these countries, and Nixon had already stepped up the bombing in Laos with some thirteen thousand sorties hitting Laos every month.443 Playing upon the public’s desire to de-Americanize the war, the generals sold further bombing as a means of improving the military situation in order to allow some withdrawals. As General Andrew Goodpaster told MACV officials on March 1, hitting the Cambodian enclaves would reduce enemy capabilities, thus giving the White House “all kinds of elbow room”

441 HAK, Why, 124; Telcon, Dobrynin and HAK, 2:45 p.m., 2/22/1969, HAK Telecons 1:3, RNPLM; and memo, HAK to RN, “Vietnam Situation and Options,” early March 1969, NSC 98:7, RNPLM.
442 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 163.
to take American troops out or adopt other politically popular tactics. Escalation could be a prerequisite to Vietnamization.\textsuperscript{444}

For all these reasons, Nixon authorized the Breakfast Plan for Cambodian bombing on March 15 with the dissenting State Department and Secretary Rogers “to be notified only after the point of no return.” Although Kissinger had strongly supported similar action for nearly a decade, he approached the final decision with great temerity, fearing this violence would tarnish his reputation if it became public. One observer recalled that until the bombing began, “He was still wringing his hands and seeking moral support to be sure that we could do it and do it without having it in the newspapers.” The thrill of the moment quickly, though temporarily, eclipsed these concerns.\textsuperscript{445} Upon reading the first military reports, Kissinger scornfully wrote Rogers, “Either Abrams knew what he was talking about or this was the storage area for firecrackers for the Chinese New Year!” Kissinger had room to boast; he had supplanted the Secretary of State as Nixon chose Kissinger’s militant course over Rogers’s moderation.\textsuperscript{446}

At Kissinger’s constant urging and behest, President Nixon had expanded and escalated the Vietnam War despite the domestic risks. Nixon and Kissinger were hoping to force an end to the conflict before public support finally gave out, and they had taken the plunge together. With bombs raining down on Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger began

\textsuperscript{444} Goodpaster quoted in Sorley, \textit{Vietnam Chronicles}, 132; and cable, Abrams to Goodpaster, 3/22/1969, NSC 65:7, RNPLM.
\textsuperscript{445} Kissinger’s angst over public knowledge of the bombing returned as hints of it reached the press. His anger over what was in reality an unexpectedly small public awareness and reaction led him to begin wiretapping key American officials, including Laird and his military assistant Robert Pursley. See Perlstein, \textit{Nixonland}, 373-374.
planning their next move: threatening the utter destruction of North Vietnam via a concerted and sustained air and naval campaign if Hanoi refused to stop its aggression against South Vietnam.

**Mad Schemes & Wild Threats**

Nixon had made a tentative decision in March to pursue Vietnamization but he also continued along the axis of escalation. The war in the South continued unabated, Laos and Cambodia suffered unprecedented bombing campaigns, and Kissinger revised schemes to attack North Vietnam. Both men hoped the president’s acts thus far had demonstrated his commitment to South Vietnam and that the threat of force, conveyed to Hanoi via the Soviets, would be sufficient to convince them to settle before it was too late. Every administration action, every international event took on greater significance as Nixon and Kissinger tried to establish the former’s image as the mad president.

Kissinger outlined his coercive diplomacy in an April 3 memo. Kissinger reasoned that Nixon could either continue the stale Paris negotiations or take “extraordinary procedures” to induce a settlement. Kissinger wrote, “I have concluded that our best course would be a bold move of trying to settle everything at once….It is the only way to end the war quickly and the best way to conclude it honorably.” Building on their prior plans, the White House would involve the Soviets by promising détente and strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) in exchange for their help in ending the war. They would also make clear that Nixon would “not be the first American President to lose a war, and he is not prepared to give in to public pressures which would have that practical consequence.” Instead, his administration would make one last attempt to compromise with Hanoi, giving them two months to respond; thereafter, Nixon would take “other measures” to end the war.
Kissinger cautioned Nixon that the Washington bureaucracy would oppose and perhaps even try to sabotage this policy. He further advised that if Nixon chose this alternative and threatened Hanoi, failure to act on this threat would destroy his credibility. In case violence proved necessary, Kissinger began examining plans to hit North Vietnam hard.\footnote{Memo, HAK to RN, 4/3/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:180-183; and Haldeman, \textit{Haldeman Diaries}, 50.}

Given North Vietnamese intransigence and hostile rhetoric, Nixon tentatively agreed with Kissinger. Buoyed by “some real faith in Kissinger’s plan,” Nixon reaffirmed to the Cabinet that the war would be over in a few months. To set the wheels in motion, the president privately ordered Kissinger to prepare for increased bombing in Cambodia but not inform the Pentagon until later, lest the civilians there undermine this effort. Significantly, he also authorized Kissinger to deliver a larger threat to Dobrynin.\footnote{Telcon, RN and HAK, 9:45 a.m., 4/5/1969, HAK Telcons 1:6, RNPLM; and Haldeman, \textit{Haldeman Diaries}, 50.}

Kissinger met with the Soviet ambassador on April 14. To impress Dobrynin with the situation’s seriousness, Kissinger delivered the threat both orally and in writing. Kissinger said Nixon was making one more push to end the war diplomatically but would take decisive measures to end the war unilaterally if the talks failed to produce results by late August. He then declared, “In dealing with the President, it was well to remember that he always did more than he threatened and that he never threatened idly.” In a rare move intended to show how serious Nixon was, Kissinger allowed Dobrynin to read Nixon’s talking points. They reiterated that Nixon would not be the first president to lose a war and U.S.-U.S.S.R relations were at a “crossroads”—settling the war would improve them whereas its continuation would jeopardize détente. Dobrynin rightly countered that the
Soviets had limited influence over Hanoi, but left noting that “this has been a very important conversation.”

As Nixon and Kissinger’s prepared their chess pieces for the final, masterful stroke, rogue North Korean pilots intervened to interrupt their schemes. Thirty-one Americans died as North Korean fighters shot down a U.S. EC-121 surveillance plane. Kissinger and Nixon interpreted the attack as a test of presidential will and wanted immediate retaliation. Nixon reasoned, “Every time [the] US fails to react, it encourages some pipsqueak to do something.” America would have to respond even if Nixon had “to overrule everybody in the State Department.” In preparation of any move, Nixon ordered ongoing surveillance flights and the immediate deployment of a U.S. Navy carrier to the region. But the situation at home appeared too fragile to tolerate new hostilities on the Korean Peninsula, and the pair’s attention shifted back to Cambodia.

As Nixon and Kissinger saw it, launching another bombing campaign in Cambodia—codenamed Lunch—would send the same message to Communists worldwide as striking a North Korean target and establish Nixon’s credibility as a mad president. Hitting Cambodia again would demonstrate American resolve to escalate the war despite the domestic risks and follow up on Kissinger’s threatening conversation with Dobrynin. Kissinger argued, “If we strike back, even though it’s risky, they will say, ‘This guy is becoming irrational—we’d better settle with him.’ But if we back down, they’ll say, ‘This

450 Hersh, Price of Power, 69; Haldeman, Haldeman Diaries, 50-51; Telcons, RN and HAK, 5:40 p.m., 6:30 p.m., 4/15/1969, HAK Telcons 1:7, RNPLM; Telcon, Dr. Kramer and HAK, 11:00 p.m., 4/15/1969, HAK Telcons 1:7, RNPLM; and Telcon, RN and HAK, 8:00 p.m., April 17, 1969, HAK Telcons 1:7, RNPLM.
guy is the same as his predecessor, and if we wait he’ll come to the same end.” Striking Cambodia a second time, rather than attacking North Vietnam, became the next step in Nixon and Kissinger’s militant Vietnam strategy.\textsuperscript{451}

Together, Nixon and Kissinger had made good on the latter’s pre-inaugural blueprint for escalating the war while threatening North Vietnam with greater violence. The Nixon administration maintained military pressure in South Vietnam and began bombing Communist enclaves in Cambodia to force Hanoi’s capitulation. Meanwhile, Kissinger delivered veiled threats of renewed bombing of the North if Hanoi continued to stall in Paris while pursuing their own offensive in the South. The Korean crisis distracted Kissinger from further contingency planning but only briefly. For the remainder of 1969, Kissinger would use his influence to encourage the president to ignore the domestic consequences and take extreme punitive measures against North Vietnam.

But Kissinger was not the only architect of America’s Vietnam strategy. Rather, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, a political genius and schemer in his own right, had his own machinations to end America’s Vietnam War. As he reminded Kissinger in a call during the EC-121 crisis, “What we’re trying to do is get the war in Vietnam over with.” Escalation in Cambodia could help, but the White House had to remember the domestic limits of a militant foreign policy. Hitting Cambodia and North Korea simultaneously could raise street protests to an intolerable level. For Laird, de-Americanization with

\textsuperscript{451} RN, RV, 384.
limited escalation was the safer path, and Laird would act to minimize Kissinger’s influence and any unnecessary violence.452

As proof of this independence, Laird ignored Nixon’s orders to step up American activity around North Korea. Laird unilaterally halted reconnaissance flights near Communist nations and stalled the aircraft carrier’s deployment to the region. Not for the last time, Kissinger fumed, “How can he do this? How can he do this? He has a direct order from the President.” As Kissinger’s aide Morton Halperin noted, “The notion that the bureaucracy doesn’t obey the President is repeated throughout his books, but still he was outraged. It was happening to him.” Indeed, Laird would de-Americanize the Vietnam War with or without the National Security Advisor’s approval. As Kissinger soon realized, he had worthy opponents in Hanoi and the Pentagon.453

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452 Telcon, Laird and HAK, 2:10 p.m., 4/16/1969, HAK Telcons 1:7, RNPLM; and Haig, Inner Circles, 207.
453 Hersh, Price of Power, 70, 73; and Haig, Inner Circles, 209.
8. Laird’s Vietnamization

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

Historians have explained Vietnamization as a carryover from the Johnson administration or as a natural outgrowth of Nixon’s 1968 campaign rhetoric.\footnote{Herring’s America’s Longest War expresses the standard interpretation that Nixon fell “back on the Vietnamization policy he had inherited from Johnson” (281). Neither did Nixon follow through on developing his campaign promises. As this chapter explains, Laird alone was Vietnamization’s architect.} It was neither. Clark Clifford had persuaded President Johnson to cap the war effort but he could not get LBJ to make even a token reduction. Nor did Clifford leave his successor a blueprint for withdrawal.\footnote{Paul Warnke, who worked closely with McNamara, Clifford, and Laird outlined the evolution of U.S. de-escalation: “Mr. McNamara during the entire period of time that I worked with him, was doing his best to bring about negotiations to scale down American involvement, to stop the bombing. Mr. Clifford spent the first 29 days of his year as secretary of defense bringing about a bombing cutback to the 19th parallel; he spent the rest of that year trying to bring about peaceful negotiations. Mr. Laird, during the very brief period of time that I served him, worked very hard for American withdrawal.” See Morton A. Kaplan, Paul Warnke, et al., Vietnam Settlement: Why 1973, not 1969? (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1973), 118-119} Nixon’s Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, produced Vietnamization, and his work on de-Americanization preceded Nixon’s inauguration as the thirty-seventh president.

Thanks to Laird’s encouragement, Richard Nixon had campaigned for and won the presidency on a de-Americanization strategy, but this pledge did not translate into ready adoption once Nixon was in the White House. Nixon instead preferred military escalation to Vietnamization, hoping to compel war-ravaged Hanoi into a settlement. Laird’s military aide, Robert Pursley, remembered, “Nixon and Kissinger were in an entirely different frame of mind. They thought: ‘We’ll win this war. We’ll hang the coonskin on the wall. Military victory—U.S.’... [Withdrawal] was damned hard for a president and a guy like
Kissinger to swallow.” Lawrence Eagleburger, then an assistant to Henry Kissinger, similarly recollected, “I don’t know when Henry ever would have been prepared to see withdrawals start.” It all came down to Laird.456

Melvin Laird was Vietnamization’s principal architect and advocate. In early 1969, the Secretary of Defense turned a Republican campaign promise into a workable plan. Laird forcefully recalled, “[Nixon] had no plan. I developed the [Vietnamization] plan.”457 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’s and 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. Looking back on the war, intelligence officer William Colby reasoned, “Laird was the unsung hero of the whole war effort. A clever Midwestern politician he saw the need to adjust American strategy to maintain the support of the American people in political terms—‘the art of the possible.’”458

Vietnamization was the art of the possible trying to accomplish the seemingly impossible: preserving the Republic of Vietnam while removing U.S. soldiers in order to save the home front. Laird was no dove. Like Nixon and Kissinger he had spent the better part of the decade advancing a tough line on Indochina. Though he had come to accept that America’s Vietnam War could not continue at its present level without destroying the

456 Pursley and Eagleburger quoted in Van Atta, With Honor, 183.
457 Interview with Melvin Laird by Tom Wells (emphasis in original).
458 Colby quoted in Sorley, A Better War, 116.
nation, he was not ready to abandon South Vietnam. As Laird defined it, Vietnamization was “the effective assumption by the RVNAF of a larger share of combat operations from American forces” so that “U.S. forces can be in fact withdrawn in substantial numbers.”

Theoretically, allied manpower and effectiveness would stay the same, keeping the heat on Communist forces. Meanwhile, the reductions would prolong public backing for the war and prevent a domestic crisis.

Laird acutely understood what awaited the Nixon administration and the country if the president delayed withdrawals or greatly escalated the conflict without sufficient cause. Like Nixon and Kissinger, Laird believed U.S. policymakers were running out of domestic support and hence “time” to end the war. As Laird put it, Americans “were fed up with Vietnam.” Popular support had plummeted. Congress increasingly threatened the war’s funding. And the fear of violent and politically damaging protests hung in the background. Whereas Nixon and Kissinger believed this lack of time necessitated forceful measures to settle the war quickly, Laird argued escalation would destroy whatever support that remained. Only Vietnamization could sustain the public and congressional backing for the length of time necessary to enable South Vietnam to stand on its own.

In early 1969, Laird worked on Vietnamization with single-minded determination. He constantly reminded Nixon of the domestic context and the political stakes, and he took independent action to limit Nixon and Kissinger’s militancy. Laird’s efforts paid off when on June 8, President Nixon announced at Midway Island the beginning of U.S. troop

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withdrawals. But as policy decisions often go, its development and adoption were far from certain.

Selling Vietnamization in Saigon and Washington

Unlike Nixon, Laird was determined to build up the South Vietnamese army while simultaneously bringing American boys home. Laird’s experience on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and his consultations with McNamara, Clifford, Warnke, and other current and former defense officials in the pre-inaugural period worked in his favor. These encounters allowed Laird to assemble a crack team of policymakers. Laird also had the benefit of focusing almost exclusively on Vietnam, and he tailored his daily schedule accordingly. Laird and his “8:15 group” began the morning by looking at public affairs and legislative issues in order, as Laird put it, to keep Defense “on message.” Laird kept continuous contact with Congress, the news media, and the military to maintain the trust and support necessary for his policies. At 9:00 a.m., he met with his handpicked “Vietnam Task Force,” which included Robert Pursley and various other Defense and CIA officials. They focused almost exclusively on Vietnamization planning and ensured the program received top priority. Laird refused to allow other matters or interests to distract or dissuade him from reducing the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam.461

Lyndon Johnson and Laird’s predecessor Clark Clifford failed to leave him a plan for de-Americanizing the war, yet Laird adapted Johnson-era scenarios for mutual withdrawal to suit his purpose. Immediately upon assuming office, Laird took the 1968 T-Day plan and made it the basis of de-Americanization planning. Laird recalled, “By

461 Reichley, Conservatives in an Age of Change, 110; and Van Atta, With Honor, 150-152, 315-316.
removing the ‘T’ from the plan (standing for ‘Termination’) we had a start for our plan….It was not a fleshed out plan in any way and the figures were very soft.” Additionally, the starting assumptions were fundamentally different; in Laird’s scenario, South Vietnam would have to contend with both indigenous NLF forces and the North Vietnamese Army. Nevertheless, it was a start. With the T-Day plan as his model, Laird and his Vietnam Task Group immediately started the Defense Department working on an official de-Americanization plan.462

By March, they had developed the basic contours of Vietnamization, but to sell his plan to the president and make it work, Laird needed to confer with U.S. military and South Vietnamese leaders on what reductions were possible. Lasting from March 5 to March 12, Laird’s first trip to Vietnam as secretary of defense was an important milestone in his push for Vietnamization. Pursley, who traveled with him, believed “administration policy was largely formulated on Laird’s first trip to Southeast Asia.”463 Not only did Laird assess the situation in the South but he also secured President Thieu’s and General Abrams’s express approval for his de-Americanization plan.

For Thieu, it was an easy sell. The situation in South Vietnam had never looked better; the government was consolidating its control of the countryside and ARVN forces were growing in strength and numbers. Thieu was confident South Vietnam could handle


463 Pursley quoted in Sorley, A Better War, 115.
the insurgency alone and only needed American aid in deterring and expelling the North Vietnamese regulars.\textsuperscript{464}

Outside observers agreed. Australia’s ambassador in Saigon believed Thieu was rightfully optimistic. R.L. Harry argued, “It would be a mistake to fall into the opposite error of over-pessimism.” He attributed the improved situation to Abrams’s emphasis on pacification and the general South Vietnamese mobilization and improvement that had followed last year’s Tet Offensive. The assumption that America would soon begin reducing its forces had created a “healthy ‘weaning programme’” of accelerated expansion, and efforts to turn disaffected NLF cadres were showing marked effectiveness. Moreover, Harry thought that “a viable civil administration has at last emerged” in Saigon. Thieu now needed a diplomatic team capable of winning the propaganda war abroad. British assessments found similar success as U.S. and ARVN forces had beaten back the Tet Offensive, leaving a power vacuum as they either destroyed the Vietcong or forced them flee. Saigon was extending its control, and given the relative sense of safety and stability, people were moving back into the countryside. Hanoi had launched a mini-Tet offensive in February to upset these gains and try to improve their battlefield position, but as the British ambassador noted, South Vietnam “had weathered the 1969 Post-Tet offensive virtually unscathed.” Overall, he observed, “Many [Vietnamese] still expect the VC to win through failure of will in America, but all are conscious of a new and rapid shift in the Government’s favour. This could be crucial.” Australia and Britain’s American cousins echoed this guarded optimism. One report noted that pacification efforts were making

\textsuperscript{464} Memorandum of Conversation, Thieu, Bunker, and Deputy Ambassador Samuel D. Berger, at Independence Palace, Saigon 3/21/1969, NSC 78:7, RNPLM.
steady progress but that the Communists could still contest most areas and that all of the gains were vulnerable to a change in the military situation. Thieu’s regime appeared to be holding onto or gaining support despite the fact that “apprehension over the settlement of the war and the firmness of the American commitment tend[ed] to reduce popular confidence.” Saigon required only time and occasional American cajoling to consolidate these gains.465

South Vietnamese fears centered on an American abandonment, and in the year preceding Laird’s visit, Thieu had been urging Americans to begin making reductions in order to buoy U.S. domestic support. Thieu constantly expressed to U.S. officials that “his greatest concern is American opinion about Viet-Nam” and he feared Nixon’s honeymoon with the public and Congress would be short-lived. He understood that American impatience would target Saigon rather than stubborn Hanoi. Though Communists had continued to bombard Saigon with rockets and mortars after the October bombing halt understanding, Thieu was against resuming the bombing of North Vietnam. He knew that action would only incite American dissent, further jeopardizing public support for the war. Paris negotiations would help assuage public opinion and buy his regime additional time, but nothing would be quite as effective as U.S. reductions. Even as American policymakers refused to let the Vietnamese in on the formulation of Nixon’s Vietnam strategy, Thieu continued to speculate publicly that Washington could begin bringing its troops home. In February, he launched the “New Opportunities” propaganda campaign to rally the people

and explain why America’s domestic pressures necessitated withdrawals but not abandonment. Prime Minister Tran Van Huong followed the president’s lead, declaring 1969 “will be a year in which we must be more self-supporting and self-sufficient than ever before. Whether the war drags on or peace is restored we shall assume more responsibilities.”

He even went so far as to suggest America could withdraw around ten thousand soldiers per month. Privately, Thieu and his advisors were drawing up their own de-Americanization plans and timetables in anticipation of and perhaps to influence Washington’s decision-making. In sum, Thieu’s confidence in his position and doubts regarding the American homefront reaffirmed his long-held view that the time had come for U.S. reductions.

Given Thieu’s longstanding support for reductions, obtaining his consent was a formality rather than a diplomatic breakthrough. In his private conversation with Thieu on March 8, Laird reiterated that the U.S. public was giving the Nixon administration roughly six to twelve months to figure out how to end the war. Thieu acknowledged that “South Viet-Nam has given American administrations and the American people many problems.” To alleviate this strain, Thieu stated that he as well as other South Vietnamese leaders were prepared for and expected a reduction of fifty thousand to seventy thousand troops by the end of the year.

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America’s military leaders in Vietnam guessed Laird’s intentions but were less sanguine about beginning reductions. In February, Laird tipped his hand when he denied MACV new funding for facilities, instead instructing them to focus on essential RVNAF modernization requirements, redirecting scarce resources toward South Vietnamese improvement. While preparing to brief Laird, Abrams’s intelligence officer, Major General Phillip Davidson, remarked that secretaries of defense always have a hidden agenda when they visit Vietnam. In his experience, McNamara came with the intention of questioning Westmoreland’s use of troops, and Clifford visited to ascertain what the U.S. 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 [sic] 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.

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469 Cable, Laird to MACV, 2/17/1969, folder “Modernization of RVNAF,” Box 4, A1-225, RG 472, NAII.
Proving Davidson’s instincts correct, Laird constantly stressed the fragility of the situation back home and the need to formulate and implement a plan for de-escalation before American patience ran out. After the trip, Laird wrote 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 situation in the United States.” Laird opined to Abrams and others that the public was only giving Nixon a brief grace period. The secretary kept reminding them that domestic factors limited the time they had to strengthen South Vietnam and that “we’ve got to make the best possible use of the time that we do have.” Continuing this line of thought, Laird contended that he and the MACV commanders must work together to develop a plan that showed the 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.” Laird guessed Washington had only six to nine months before time ran out and Americans demanded immediate action. Assuming Nixon had only three or four months to lay out an acceptable policy, Laird suggested Abrams begin planning for a withdrawal of 44,000 troops within the next three to nine months.

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,

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472 Clarke, Advice and Support, 347; Laird quoted in Sorley, Vietnam Chronicles, 140-141.
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.\footnote{Laird, “Unforgettable Creighton Abrams,” Reader’s Digest, July 1976, 74.} Although Abrams saw ARVN forces as improving, he believed that without the help of U.S. troops and military aid, South Vietnam would not survive a coordinated attack from the NLF and the North Vietnamese army. Should negotiations for a mutual withdrawal fail, Abrams maintained that the United States should predicate any unilateral withdrawal on pacification of the South Vietnamese countryside, improvement in the South Vietnamese army, and a diminished threat from the North Vietnamese. Nevertheless, provided sufficient time and resources, Abrams believed Vietnamization could work and began drawing up tentative withdrawal plans. Proving Laird had his support, on March 22, Abrams posited a 20,000-25,000 man reduction during the summer was doable, followed by a similar withdrawal by year’s end. 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.\footnote{Laird, “Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam” Foreign Affairs 84 (2005): 22.} 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. Having secured a green light for troop withdrawal, Laird returned home to persuade Nixon to accept his Vietnamization plan.\footnote{Willbanks, Abandoning Vietnam, 14; Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, 137-138; Lewis Sorley, Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 259, 263; and cable, Abrams to Goodpaster, 3/22/1969, NSC 65:7, RNPLM.}

Back in Washington, Laird finished the plan with the aid of Warnke and Pursley and then forwarded his proposal to the president on March 13.\footnote{Laird, interview with author, June 21, 2007.} 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 Washington “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 and Johnson-era 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.” Instead, Laird assumed that no peace deal would be forthcoming, that Hanoi would not give up its designs on the South willingly, that policymakers could not escalate the war beyond what was necessary to preserve South Vietnam, and that true self-determination required the “capability for sustained self-defense and self-reliance.”

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 50,000-70,000 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 and encourage Vietnamese responsibility and political development. Significantly, Laird’s proposal marked the first formal de-Americanization plan presented

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to the president, and it would achieve Laird’s goal of directing subsequent policy discussions towards troop redeployment. Nixon did not immediately approve Laird’s recommendations, but continued to weigh his options even though a reduction sometime in 1969 was in line with his private statements to policymakers earlier that year.\footnote{Ibid.}

Revealing the Wise Men’s continued influence on the White House, Nixon solicited Dean Acheson’s advice on March 19. Acheson urged the president to begin a systematic withdrawal irrespective of the course of negotiations. Acheson’s advice to Nixon was identical to what he had given LBJ in March 1968, but this time the commander-in-chief agreed with Acheson’s assessment.\footnote{Cf. Isaacson and Thomas, \textit{The Wise Men}, 702.} 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.\footnote{William Bundy, \textit{A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Administration} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 66.}

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 diminishing the overall combat capability of Allied forces. A product of the NSSM 1 imbroglio, these disagreements further factionalized the Washington bureaucracy. One of the few things on which they all agreed was that even a modernized and expanded South Vietnamese army could not handle both NLF and NVA forces without extensive U.S. combat support. Joint Chiefs Chairman Earle Wheeler even doubted the South Vietnamese could defeat indigenous guerillas, much less a renewed
North Vietnamese invasion, by themselves until after the second phase of ARVN improvement was finished in 1972. Thus, Laird and Secretary of State Rogers, who also believed for domestic reasons that it was time to de-escalate the war, were staunch advocates of the troop withdrawal, whereas many on the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed these measures. Yet, Congress intervened to remind President Nixon that de-Americanization remained politically imperative.481

The Congressional Context and Nixon’s Decision to Vietnamize the War

Richard Nixon’s congressional situation was difficult from the beginning: he was the first president since Zachary Taylor in 1849 to enter his first term with the opposition controlling both houses of Congress. The fracturing Cold War consensus on defense, alliances, and Communist containment along with the increasing number of antiwar votes in Congress made support there even more difficult. As reporter Mary McGrory observed, the “great tide of anti-military, anti-war sentiment that has swept through the country” was apparent in Congress and posed a real challenge to defense appropriations. Even fellow Republicans, especially those in the Senate, were not consistent supporters of Nixon’s policies. In 1969, Senate doves lacked cohesion or significant numbers, but the Nixon administration saw Congress as a real and growing challenge to executive leadership and foreign policy.482

Congress had given the White House its customary honeymoon, but this vacation from criticism showed early signs of ending. In February, Senator J. William Fulbright

482 Reichley, Conservatives in an Age of Change, 79, 93; Johnson, Congress and the Cold War, 105, 153-154; Small, Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves, 178-179; and Johns, Vietnam’s Second Front, 249.
(D-AR), the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair, announced the creation of an “Ad Hoc Subcommittee on U.S. Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad” to examine the nation’s treaties, executive agreements, overseas deployments, facilities, and foreign aid programs. Although senators excluded Vietnam, the group’s goal was to limit executive foreign policy and expose agreements that came with high costs or entangled the country in dangerous areas that increased the likelihood of another Vietnam-like intervention. That same month, Fulbright reintroduced a resolution that would constrain a president’s power to make commitments without congressional assent. As Nixon and other policymakers saw it, these investigations brought unwanted public scrutiny to America’s global commitments and alliances, disheartening U.S. allies and emboldening its enemies.

In March, congressional opposition to Nixon’s anti-ballistic missile (ABM) proposal confirmed White House worries as a raucous, vigorous debate erupted in the Senate over the program. Nixon saw ABM development as not only a necessary nuclear deterrent but also a vital bargaining chip in his future talks with the Soviets. By mid-March, it seemed that the Senate was challenging every Nixon foreign policy item save Vietnam, and that too was changing.483

Senator doves initially believed Nixon was pursuing peace in Vietnam and so attacked defense appropriations and the ABM proposal instead, but in March they began to conclude he was moving too slowly. No one was demanding the immediate

abandonment of South Vietnam, and even Fulbright said in February that it was “premature to start bringing large numbers of troops home now.” But they brought increased pressure on the White House to settle.

On March 21, Laird bore the brunt of these early attacks on Capitol Hill. Fulbright berated Laird, “You’ve got to do something radical to change this war or we’re going down the drain. Soon it will be Nixon’s war, and then there will be little chance to bring it to an end.” Fulbright then appealed to Laird’s political sense, “De-escalating and settling the war would not only be a great service to the American people, but I am sure would also be good politics.” Fulbright believed that to do otherwise would invite domestic catastrophe as the people lost faith in the government. Fulbright concluded, “Mr. Secretary, more armaments degrade and threaten our security rather than enhance it.” Laird and the Nixon White House could either reap the political gains of de-escalating and ending the war or sow potentially devastating dissent by continuing an unwinnable war.

Of course, as a former congressman, Laird understood the congressional and political realities better than most. Laird held, “The Congress is a reflection of our country. Public opinion is reflected in the Congress faster than any other place.” He took Fulbright’s words as further proof Americans “were fed up with Vietnam” and that Congress would terminate the war’s funding unless the Nixon administration soon began reducing the number of troops in Vietnam. But because of Nixon’s moratorium on withdrawal talk, he

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485 Mann, *Grand Delusion*, 624.
486 Evans and Novak, *Nixon in the White House*, 83-84; and address, Fulbright to Laird, 3/21/1969, folder “Published Statements and Speeches, January 21 68-December 22, 1970,” Box 2:3, Series 74, Published Statements and Speeches, 1943-1974, JWFP, UA.
could not give the hostile senators any public indication of his de-Americanization planning. As Defense officials saw it, Laird was becoming an easy political target, “a relatively risk-free means of promoting their own individual candidacies” as they attacked Laird and other hawks as “the single greatest obstacle to domestic harmony and progress.”

Behind the politics also lay institutional and ideological rebellion against Cold War foreign policy. Congress increasingly looked for opportunities to reassert a measure of control over U.S. foreign policy. As seen in the formation of the Senate sub-committee on American commitments, a growing number of congressional leaders also wanted to scrutinize executive commitments and reduce costly deployments abroad. Laird appreciated these factors, telling British officials he was fighting the “withdrawal syndrome” in Congress. Nevertheless, he could at least cite the ABM debate and testy congressional hearings as further proof that Congress would not tolerate escalation or any delay in de-Americanizing the war.

Nixon faced this congressional opposition firsthand when he met with Senator Fulbright on March 27. Fulbright warned Nixon and Kissinger against escalation and gave the president a personal memo on the war. The senator argued that the people had elected Nixon to end the war and that preserving the Republic of Vietnam was not vital to American national security or its strategic aim of containing Communist China. Fulbright blamed the lack of progress in Paris on American and South Vietnamese diplomats, and he

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488 Laird quoted in anonymous, n.d., DEFE 68/23, PRO.
489 Johnson, Congress and the Cold War, 105.
urged the president to let the Vietnamese “fight it out” should talks fail. South Vietnam’s fall would damage neither U.S. interests nor Nixon’s political reputation. Kissinger considered Fulbright one of the “unpacifiable doves” identified by their “escalating concessions,” but Nixon could not ignore their influence entirely. The following day Nixon finally decided to pursue serious de-Americanization planning.\(^{490}\)

Much of the March 28 NSC meeting focused on de-Americanization. Although bureaucratic disagreements over the war remained, most of the meeting’s participants assumed some level of de-escalation and at least a token withdrawal of U.S. soldiers. Nixon cautioned, “We must move in a deliberate way, not to show panic. We cannot be stampeded by the likes of Fulbright.” If the administration appeared to be giving in to domestic needs, the pressure to end the war would only increase and the United States would forfeit its negotiating strength. The White House had to find a politically expedient way of justifying troop reductions.\(^{491}\)

As Nixon put it, he needed “some symbol” that the situation was improving and warranted withdrawals, and it was at this moment, Vietnamization entered American parlance. In the 1968 election, Nixon had laid the basis for a withdrawal contingent upon the buildup of ARVN forces, but at a March 14 press conference, he had added pacification and a reduction of 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 had “only a couple of divisions that are worth anything.” Nixon had


already ruled out conditioning unilateral withdrawal on the negotiations’ progress, lest he bind reductions 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.

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.492

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. Ambiguous on his own views, Henry Kissinger separated this 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.493

493 Ibid., 6:170-172.
Despite the brief discussion noted above, timetables for steady reductions were missing from the debate as the Nixon administration continued to focus on a negotiated settlement mandating mutual withdrawal. Nixon and Kissinger still believed they would have a settlement by the end of the year and so resisted a concerted policy of de-escalation. 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.”\textsuperscript{494} A set timetable for unilateral reductions 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.”\textsuperscript{495}

The White House had turned a corner, though; 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. The administration would continue to study negotiations and Vietnamization in the interim while preparing two presidential speeches to announce these developments and buoy domestic support. Beyond that first reduction, though, it would be up to Laird to make American troop withdrawals a part of a broader plan.\textsuperscript{496}

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

\textsuperscript{494} Ibid., 6:169.
\textsuperscript{495} National Security Decision Memorandum 9, RN, 4/1/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:179
American forces and the development of a timetable for Vietnamizing the war. More important, RN stipulated that there be two separate studies on phased withdrawal: one considering conditions of mutual withdrawal and the other examining redeployment as a consequence of Vietnamizing the war.\textsuperscript{497}

The president naturally assigned Vietnamization’s most ardent advocate the study on Vietnamization. National Security Study Memorandum 36 (NSSM 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{498} As public and private negotiations with North Vietnam failed to secure mutual withdrawal, the power delegated to Laird because of this memo increased dramatically.

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 assumed that its implementation would occur “with current North Vietnamese and Vietcong force levels,” and that the planners would adjust these levels as needed to match updated 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 job.\textsuperscript{499}

Historian and former policymaker William Bundy accurately identified March 1969 as the “month of decision.”\textsuperscript{500} 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 planning for Vietnamization. Overall, these three decisions gave Laird the precedents and the power he

\textsuperscript{499} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{500} Bundy, \textit{A Tangled Web}, 66.
needed to implement Vietnamization. But Nixon had also decided in March to begin a savage bombing campaign in Cambodia.

By month’s end, it was clear that the debate over Cambodia and Vietnamization had illuminated and entrenched the bureaucratic divisions. Nixon could lecture his Cabinet on the value of negotiating from military strength but the split remained and threatened to grow worse. As Kissinger noted, Vietnam pitted those officials who would only discuss de-escalation in the context of mutual withdrawal against those policymakers who entertained a range of de-escalatory options. The former believed victory in South Vietnam was within reach over the next eighteen to twenty-four months and that a strategy of coercive diplomacy and escalation would shorten this time. These hawks admitted that the unrestricted bombing of North Vietnam would come with a high political cost and perhaps incite serious domestic unrest, but they hedged Hanoi’s stubbornness and mini-Tet offensive would justify American escalation, making the public more tolerable of this alternative. Administration doves (and “dawks” like Laird) doubted the public could continue to tolerate the war at its present level. They emphasized a strategy of increasing RVNAF responsibility and reducing America’s presence to sustain popular support. With his Cabinet divided, Nixon vacillated, choosing both Laird’s Vietnamization program and Kissinger’s escalatory schemes.\footnote{Haldeman, \textit{Haldeman Diaries}, 42; Alternate HAK Talking Points for NSC Meeting, 3/28/1969, NSC 74:7, RNPLM; and Vietnam Policy Alternatives, c. 3/28/1969, NSC 74:7, RNPLM.}

As Washington reporters understood, Kissinger and Laird were pulling Nixon’s Vietnam strategy in two different directions.\footnote{See Joseph Kraft, “Laird, Kissinger Approaches Affect President’s Peace Plan,” \textit{Washington Post}, April 8, 1969.} Kissinger’s coercive diplomacy could not
coexist with Laird’s unilateral reductions. In April, the battle over Nixon’s Vietnam strategy escalated but so too did campus unrest.

**Turmoil at Home and Abroad**

April proved a violent month, though Laird tried to reduce international and domestic tension. Laird leaked details regarding Vietnamization in order to stave off congressional criticism and build support for his Vietnam strategy. He also independently reduced the number of B-52 sorties in South Vietnam and worked to prevent a new conflagration in Korea. Despite these efforts, unprecedented violence erupted at universities nationwide, and Nixon launched another round of attacks in Cambodia.

With the bureaucratic wheels set in motion, the Nixon administration began preparing to make its 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. Nixon constantly denied to journalists that his administration was planning any withdrawals, but White House statements were typical Nixon disinformation. Nixon hoped the bigger the surprise, the bigger the public relations windfall.

Yet, Laird began leaking his Vietnamization strategy to reporters even before the plan received presidential approval. As journalist Douglass Cater famously quipped, “The primary cause for the almost constant revelation of behind-the-scenes episodes of government is the power struggle that goes on within the government itself or among the governments doing business in Washington.”

Indeed, by publicizing Vietnamization,

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Laird hoped to ensure its survival, giving it respectability and the appearance of presidential legitimacy even before Nixon agreed to its implementation. If the public accepted this strategy as a given, it would be much harder for Kissinger to delay or stop troop withdrawals. Laird’s leaks also gave Congress and the news media notice that reductions were forthcoming, prolonging Nixon’s political honeymoon until the actual troop withdrawal announcement took place.504

Nixon and Kissinger were not pleased. Though Laird remained anonymous (even accusing Kissinger of the leaks), Kissinger affixed the blame squarely on Laird, telling Rogers that “by the time we do anything it will be a disappointment.” Nixon followed with a harsh memo to Cabinet members, establishing an absolute moratorium on leaks and any public talk of reductions. Nixon wrote, “When we make our troop withdrawal statement I think the President should be in a position to make the announcement without having the entire impact of it eroded by leaks and dope stories prior to that time.” As it was, Nixon feared these leaks gave the public appearance that he had “lost control of his team” with everyone seemingly “going off in different directions.” Of course, Laird and Kissinger were pursuing different strategies to end the war in Vietnam.505

Laird ran further afoul of the president and national security advisor when he unilaterally reduced the number of B-52 sorties in South Vietnam and announced this decision to the news media on April 1. Laird understood that Congress was increasing its scrutiny of defense expenditures and that without some voluntary decreases, Congress

504 Van Atta, With Honor, 182-183.
505 Telcon, Rogers and HAK, 9:15 p.m., 4/4/1969, HAK Telcons 1:6, RNPLM; and memo, RN, 4/14/1969, folder “Personal Papers of William P. Rogers,” Box 3, E-5439, RG 59, NAII.
might enact intolerable cuts. Reducing these costly air operations would save millions while ameliorating tensions over Vietnam.506

Kissinger argued Laird’s announcement was inconsistent and contrary to Nixon’s wishes and that it threatened to undermine their whole strategy of coercive diplomacy. He berated Laird, “The only thing we are trying to avoid is the impression of de-escalation.” And yet Laird had reduced air operations vital to keeping military pressure on the enemy in South Vietnam. Moscow, Hanoi, and the American news media would interpret this move as evidence of war-weariness and a deliberate sign of eagerness to settle.507 During the EC-121 crisis with North Korea two weeks later, Laird would again act on his own as he ignored a presidential order and limited U.S. air operations that risked new hostilities and gave the appearance of presidential militancy. Kissinger was furious at Laird’s conduct, believing he had again undermined Nixon’s reputation as a mad president. The Secretary of Defense had domestic problems in mind as he feared attacking Korea while expanding the Cambodian bombing would precipitate a violent reaction at home.508

For all the attention paid to 1968, people overlook 1969’s higher number of violent social protests. Although demonstrations had marred Nixon’s inauguration, the violence at the 1968 Democratic Convention had cost the antiwar movement popular support, and so broad antiwar activity and mobilization waned in early 1969. Instead, dissent grew more

506 Van Atta, With Honor, 184.
507 Journalist Scottie Reston called Kissinger to confirm this development. He felt the White House would not sanction these reductions simply for budgetary reasons; it had to be a signal to either Hanoi or Saigon. See Telcon, Scottie Reston and HAK, 3:45 p.m., 4/3/1969, HAK Telcons 1:6, RNPLM.
radical and more violent. Typifying this trend, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) faced increasing factionalism in early 1969 as the militants usurped power and pressed the organization to abandon nonviolence. One of those pushing SDS in this direction, Bill Ayers declared, “Kill all the rich people. Break up their cars and apartments. Bring the revolution home, kill your parents, that’s where it’s really at.”

In reality, the university was at the center of this unrest. Arrests for campus violence doubled in 1969, and three hundred universities witnessed major protests against the war that spring with one quarter having buildings forcibly occupied by students. Occupations at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard precipitated violent interventions by the National Guard and local police respectively. The most prominent was at Cornell University in upstate New York where armed African American militants seized Willard Straight Hall on April 18. Though the occupation ended peacefully, journalists as far away as London reported that America was “on the brink of racial revolution.”

Looking back, sociologist Tom Wells summarized these radical developments,

Political violence was escalating. There were at least eighty-four bombings, attempted bombings, and acts of arson on campuses in the first half of 1969, twice as many as the previous fall. America’s high schools were the scenes of twenty-seven bombings and attempted bombings….Talk of armed revolution was as common as hot dogs at a baseball game.

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510 For detailed information regarding the confrontation at Cornell, see Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 374-378.
Most of this turmoil was unrelated to Vietnam, but the unrest increased administration fears that a dramatic, public escalation of the war in Indochina would make the disorder much worse.511

The White House approached this unrest with trepidation. Officials worried the protests and college occupations would weaken American credibility with Hanoi, encourage popular antiwar sentiment, and open Nixon up to political attacks for having failed on law and order. One administration analyst noted students around the world were adopting the style of “provocation, confrontation, [and] violence,” and predicted that the radicals’ influence would increase regardless of what governments and universities did. Both this influence and popular fears of social dissolution could increase the numbers of those lobbying for an immediate end to the war. Ray Price recalled, “A lot of people took the students seriously—a lot more seriously than they should have been taken. This itself was a kind of snowballing political problem for us.” Roger Morris explained,

We saw the seriousness of the early antiwar movement not so much in an analysis of whether it was a minority or a majority—it was always a minority. We saw that as affecting overall public opinion, we saw that as affecting the Congress, and as a furthering the defection of the press….This might be a bunch of wild-eyed kids or little old ladies in tennis shoes walking down Pennsylvania Avenue…but it had an insidious effect in public opinion and in the Congress.

Another staffer argued that groups like SDS were urging “student radicals to shave off [their] long hair, don the ‘Establishment Uniform’ of a coat and tie, and obtain summer or extended employment with workers in industry or government for the purpose of proselyting them.” Indeed, the White House saw these campus protestors as revolutionary

terrorists bent on destroying society. Nixon told an audience in late March, “This is the way civilizations begin to die….None of us has the right to suppose it cannot happen here.” Hence, the White House exaggerated the impact of student unrest and activism, but the fear that the antiwar movement would become mainstream heightened the sense that time was working against American objectives in Vietnam. Yet, Nixon was not afraid to use this unrest to his political advantage.  

Nixon marshaled the quiet Americans by appealing to the popular anger, antagonism, and fear the campus disorders produced. A spring Harris poll found that “52 percent [of Americans] now opposed peaceful demonstrations by students.” Overlooked by the news media, “decency rallies” occurred nationwide as Nixon’s “silent Americans” protested the protestors. Nixon dealt with the politics of polarization to his benefit even as it further fractured national unity.

Laird also saw the political advantages but hoped to calm a dangerous domestic situation. Vietnamization would steadily eliminate the war as controversial issue, but Laird also proposed a draft lottery to relieve youth hostility. Given the uncertainty created by the draft system and the hostility towards the war, many students interpreted the draft as a death sentence. At the University of Pennsylvania’s spring commencement, graduates handed out fliers that read: “The somber male graduate in the assemblage before you is angry and afraid, for he is contemplating death for the first time. Many of those wearing

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513 Quoted in Wells, *The War Within*, 298-299 (emphasis added).
514 Perlstein, *Nixonland*, xii, 380-381.
cap and gowns today will die—or worse—kill in Viet-Nam.” Aware of this mood, Laird believed conscription was “the most combustible element in the campus tinderbox.” With universities erupting in violence nationwide, Laird’s vision was an all-volunteer force, which would remove the draft issue entirely, but he readied a draft reform plan as an expedient so that Nixon could announce it in mid-May. The proposed system based conscription on birth dates chosen by lottery. This reform would make the draft more transparent, making one’s odds of being drafted clear and so freeing most young people from the angst of the draft. General William Westmoreland understood what Laird was doing. He recalled, “That was Mel Laird’s baby. He was trying to defuse the younger generation.” With the number of bombings, occupations, and demonstrations increasing on campuses nationwide, Laird hoped draft reform would be a step toward de-escalating the domestic turmoil.  

Press leaks, reduced air sorties, and the draft lottery were not panaceas but they were necessary balms. In April, Laird worked to stave off crises at home and abroad by advancing each of these measures, with or without presidential support. Vietnamization remained his primary focus, though. Short of ending the war, only steady troop withdrawals appeared capable of removing the war from the center of American life.

**Shoring Up the Numbers**

As April ended, progress on Vietnamization quickened. Thus far, the White House had only made a tentative decision to withdraw some troops as early as July. Laird’s staff had to confirm this decision and finalize planning for the first tranche. Although Deputy  

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Secretary of Defense David Packard instructed Defense officials that henceforth “Vietnamizing the war should have the highest priority,” early estimates had the final reviews of NSSM 36 taking place in August. The domestic context catalyzed this planning, though. As a May 9 update noted, “Political realities may force a decision on troop withdrawal sooner than anticipated.” Nixon’s honeymoon was ending, and the president needed a range of alternatives before Congress and the public turned against the war. Even Kissinger recognized that the president had to reveal a reduction before speculation robbed the announcement of its public impact. In May then, the White House and the Pentagon came together to determine the size and timing of the first reduction and thus shore up public support for the war and Nixon’s handling of it.

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 another compelling reason for Nixon to speak out. Rogers was eager to announce his own peace plan, and Nixon feared that the State

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516 Packard had left his company Hewlett-Packard at Laird’s behest. He served Laird as a powerful ally with a trenchant mind.
518 Dallek, Partners in Power, 127.
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 they would lead to a negotiated settlement. Nixon thought 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 concerns while preventing members of his Cabinet from making their own declarations on how to end the war.\footnote{Haldeman, *Haldeman Diaries*, 55; Editorial Note, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 6:215-216; and HAK, *WHY*, 261, 270.}

Nixon’s address focused on the Paris peace negotiations while avoiding almost any indication that the administration would shortly initiate a unilateral troop withdrawal program. As part of Nixon’s efforts to guarantee that the first withdrawal announcement surprised the public and his critics, early drafts were pessimistic about any reduction. After seeing one such draft, Laird urged the president to include some reference to their efforts to bring soldiers home apart from success in Paris. Laird contended that should Nixon announce a reduction so soon after this speech on negotiations and mutual withdrawal, the enemy would interpret a reduction as evidence of America’s weak bargaining position. Nixon acquiesced.\footnote{Memo, Laird to RN, 5/13/1969, NSC 76:2, RNPLM.}

President Nixon 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.” 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. Despite the Nixon administration’s conviction that the May 14 speech represented the most comprehensive American peace plan to date, historian Robert Dallek correctly noted that “hindsight demonstrates how unimportant the speech was.”

Not only did the speech fail to bring an immediate settlement to the conflict, it also proved unsuccessful at assuaging domestic critics. Eight Democrats in the House countered by proposing a ceasefire with the simultaneous withdrawal of 100,000 U.S. troops. Congressional doves also took the contemporaneous battle for “Hamburger Hill” as proof Nixon was as wedded to military victory as Johnson was. Having scores of Americans sacrificed for a South Vietnamese hill, which the military promptly abandoned, enflamed this sentiment. Fulbright staffer Lee Williams wanted Congress to seize the moment with a television program to “force the American people to face the fact that these are their sons bleeding and dying in Vietnam.” Perhaps by showing mangled and crippled soldiers in Army hospitals, Congress could bring more pressure against the White House to end the war. The May 14 speech also failed to elicit widespread support for Nixon’s peace efforts. According to the Gallup Poll, nearly sixty percent of Americans believed it was time to begin monthly reductions of U.S. forces in Vietnam. Nixon could no longer

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put off withdrawals. Shortly after giving his speech, Nixon decided to reveal Vietnamization with President Thieu in early June, but there was still no unanimity of opinion on the size or timing of the first withdrawal.\footnote{Selin, “Vietnamization,” 18-19; Willbanks, Abandoning Vietnam, 44-45; and memo, Lee Williams to Martin Agronsky, 5/22/1969, folder “Vietnam General Materials, 1969,” Box 45:2, Subseries 17 Vietnam—(General Materials), Series 48 Foreign Relations Committee, JWFP, UA.}

In Vietnam, General Abrams realized that at present, the South Vietnamese military alone could not handle both NVA and guerilla forces and that accelerated ARVN improvement would not justify U.S. reductions. He growled, “That would be just a case of the United States kidding itself, and [pounding the table] by god you mustn’t kid yourself!” That said, Abrams believed the military situation was the best it had been since NVA regulars began pouring into the South in 1964. Given this strong position, Abrams argued the president could withdraw two divisions (roughly forty thousand combat troops) within the next six months.\footnote{Sorley, Vietnam Chronicles, 184-186, 192; and memo, Ivan Selin to Laird, 5/13/1969, #50, folder “Vietnam, Documents 47-50,” Box C32, LP, GFL.}

President Thieu agreed, letting Washington as well as the Saigon news corps know that the South Vietnamese accepted a fifty thousand reduction in 1969. Since Laird’s March visit, Thieu had continued to prepare his people for American withdrawals. He told them in April, “We are determined and we will make untiring efforts to gradually take over full responsibility in the present fight with only an effective material assistance from allied nations.” Having consulted with the White House on Nixon’s May 14 speech, Thieu now wanted a public meeting with Nixon to help win over the American public and announce an initial reduction. While many in Saigon feared Nixon would take this opportunity to


\footnote{Sorley, Vietnam Chronicles, 184-186, 192; and memo, Ivan Selin to Laird, 5/13/1969, #50, folder “Vietnam, Documents 47-50,” Box C32, LP, GFL.}
force a coalition government upon the South Vietnamese, Thieu had prepared the public to accept a withdrawal announcement. As Thieu saw it, the problem was in America, not South Vietnam.\footnote{525}

Back in Washington, the Nixon administration feuded over troop numbers and the larger Vietnamization timetable. Although Laird wanted an initial redeployment of 50,000 troops, he worked with the Pentagon to arrive at a number that would not jeopardize the war effort. These internal negotiations reduced the proposed number to 35,000, but Kissinger and the Joint Chiefs still considered this number too high. Kissinger worried that a large reduction would hurt their bargaining position, and despite General Abrams’s support for the larger redeployment, 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 domestic opinion would quickly turn against the war. Nevertheless, all parties finally agreed on an initial reduction of about 25,000 military personnel.\footnote{526}

The decision to make the announcement at Nixon’s scheduled June 8 meeting with President Thieu also encountered resistance. Ambassador Bunker in particular urged Nixon to wait another month, arguing this delay would give Thieu time to complete several pacification programs and demonstrate greater progress towards Vietnamization.\footnote{527} By May 21, Nixon had decided to make the announcement at Midway, though. Nixon


\footnote{526}{Interview with Melvin Laird by Tom Wells; and Selin, “Vietnamization,” 19.}

reasoned that continued speculation about an impending withdrawal was reducing the impact the surprise announcement would make. Overall, Nixon saw Midway as an opportunity to shore up domestic support for the Thieu government while using the troop reduction as a means to undercut those groups within America calling for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces. Even the date and site of this announcement—the small Pacific island of Midway—reflected this domestic context as Nixon sought to avoid giving a university address possibly fraught with protestors and feared inviting Thieu stateside would unleash widespread riots.\footnote{528}

After the president had made his decision, Laird quickly set out to finalize his Vietnamization policy. Initial drafts saw several realistic alternatives that removed between fifty thousand or one hundred thousand soldiers in 1969. Laird recognized that withdrawing the smaller number would not necessarily have a significant effect on American opinion whereas the larger figure “could create a clamor alleging ‘abandonment’ of the Republic of Vietnam.” Laird then proposed reducing manpower in Vietnam by eighty-two thousand as this number would “impact favorably on U.S. public opinion” without demoralizing South Vietnam or diminishing the war effort there. The Secretary of Defense chose to move cautiously, though, suggesting larger figures so that he could then compromise with the military and reach a number that was both militarily and politically acceptable.\footnote{529}

\footnotetext[529]{Memo, Wheeler to Laird, 5/31/1969, #57, folder “Vietnam, Documents 56-57,” Box C32, LP, GFL.}
The completed version of NSSM 36 reflected Laird’s bargaining, and concluded that withdrawal planning should remain flexible with twenty-five thousand troops removed initially and up to fifty thousand for the year. Consistent with their campaign rhetoric, Laird informed Nixon, “This plan is keyed to past and expected future improvements in the South Vietnamese Armed Forces.” Laird again argued that “the larger alternatives would best mitigate pressures to end the war” and he gave Nixon the option of making a second withdrawal announcement in August, followed by a third in October or November. Laird believed that Vietnamization 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. Likewise, Laird thought that it would convince the South Vietnamese that America remained committed to their defense and would therefore boost morale in that country. Finally, Laird hoped that the announcement of troop withdrawals would encourage important elements of the American population, particularly members of Congress, to continue to support the war.\footnote{Memo, Laird to RN, 6/2/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:263-266; and draft for Laird briefing of RN, 6/7/1969, International Security Affairs, 6/6/1969, #59, folder “Vietnam, Documents 58-62,” Box C32, LP, GFL.}

Contrary to much of the historiography, Nixon’s decision to reduce American forces did not sadden or upset Thieu; he had been urging this very program upon U.S. policymakers for over a year.\footnote{Cf. Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 149-150.} As Kissinger noted, Thieu had “developed a real sensitivity toward the domestic problems faced in the United States.” Thieu accepted that withdrawals were necessary to stave off a complete collapse on the U.S. home front and he
believed that given ARVN strength they were now possible. Upon departing Saigon, Thieu declared his nation’s readiness to replace American troops, now and in the years to come. He stated, “We are determined to take over the responsibility. We are ready to do that. And we are able to do that.”

If the South Vietnamese were ready to assume any burden, Nixon worried Americans were ready to abandon their global responsibilities. Addressing the Air Force Academy’s commencement, Nixon condemned those “new isolationists” who blamed America for the world’s ills and desired to curtail its international commitments. Nixon was strident. “You are entering the military service of your country when the Nation’s potential adversaries abroad have never been stronger and when your critics at home have never been more numerous,” he asserted. “It is open season on the Armed Forces.” Nixon was reacting to a perceived wave of anti-militarism while trying to shore up his conservative support in preparation for Midway’s de-escalation. He also intended his militant talk to confuse the news media, hopefully delaying the publication of any leaked information on withdrawals and so increase Vietnamization’s value as a political surprise. Instead, Nixon made more enemies. One of the supposed “neo-isolationists,” Senator Fulbright noted his disappointment at the president’s tone. Fulbright wrote, “It looks to me like he is going all the way back to [the vitriolic anticommunism of] Whittaker Chambers and Joe McCarthy and I confess I see very little hope for much change.”

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Presiding over an increasingly divided nation, the president hoped for a big public relations win at Midway.\footnote{RN, “Address at the Air Force Academy Commencement Exercises in Colorado Springs, Colorado,” 6/4/1969, from Woolley and Peters, The American Presidency Project \url{http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2081} (accessed 8/9/2013); Safire, Before the Fall, 137-141; and Telcon, RN and HAK, 12:30 p.m., 5/29/1969, HAK Telcons 1:10, RNPLM.}

Thus, Nixon and Thieu came together at Midway Island on June 8 to commiserate over America’s internal problems and demonstrate allied unity. Expressing his concern over the 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. Thieu only desired increased military and economic aid, which Nixon promised to deliver over the next eight years. Having secured Thieu’s approval in person, Nixon announced the first redeployment of U.S. troops.\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation, 6/8/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:248-249.}

As expected, Americans reacted favorably to the news that the Nixon administration would remove 25,000 U.S. troops by August 31, 1969. Support for Nixon’s handling of the war jumped from the mid-40s to 52 percent of Americans after Midway. Sixty-two percent opposed the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops (29% favored) instead backing monthly reductions. One \textit{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.536

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 appeared short lived.

Within the Nixon administration, a bureaucratic conflict was emerging. Having lost this battle over Vietnam policy, Henry Kissinger was now determined to stall, if not 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 Vietnam strategy. 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 Nixon’s strategy to end the war or devolved into a series of token withdrawals. Of course, as Kissinger and Laird wrangled over foreign policy, America’s allies and enemies debated the meaning of America’s tentative exit from Indochina.


Vietnamization and Escalation in the Global Context

“What is on the line is more than South Vietnam. It’s a question of what happens to the balance of Asia and to the rest of the world.” ~Richard Nixon

“American policy should be acceptable to the countries of the region and to U.S. public opinion, as well as manageable within U.S. resources.” ~Richard Nixon

President Richard Nixon’s Vietnamization announcement on Midway Island surprised few international observers. All recognized that U.S. domestic circumstances dictated unilateral withdrawals, but given the improved situation in South Vietnam, for the time being they at least seemed warranted. U.S. allies hoped the reductions would satisfy the American people and Congress whereas Hanoi expected internal pressures would override a prudent withdrawal program. Above all, each group understood Vietnamization was both a palliative for a public weary of foreign war and a symptom of America’s political trend towards disengagement.

In recording their first impressions of Vietnamization, international policymakers contended that it had the appearance of a workable strategy—politically and militarily. Already on the lookout for global de-Americanization, U.S. allies considered Vietnamization an indicator of whether America was abandoning global responsibility or merely reevaluating its strategies to fit the changing domestic mood. Precipitate withdrawal or outright abandonment would call all U.S. alliances into question, especially given the growing domestic lobby for international retrenchment. This threat remained in the future as Nixon chose the most conservative of reductions, maintained a strong military

posture in Indochina, and kept a solid political position in the United States that summer. To America’s friends and foes, it appeared that Nixon might be able to save the Republic of Vietnam through the “long haul,” Vietnamization strategy. But the storm clouds of congressional and popular opinion remained on the horizon.

With antiwar forces gathering strength in the public and Congress, Nixon worried his support would not last. Nixon believed the nation’s as well as his own credibility was at stake in South Vietnam and so that summer he decided to make a final push for a settlement. Nixon reasoned, “What is on the line is more than South Vietnam. It’s a question of what happens to the balance of Asia and to the rest of the world.” American defeat would embolden its enemies, frighten its friends, and turn Americans further inward. The Nixon administration had to talk and act tough. And it had to win in Vietnam. Laird’s Vietnamization provided no guarantee Nixon would sustain the public and congressional support necessary to turn South Vietnam into a nation capable of self-defense. Thus, Nixon backed Henry Kissinger’s scheme to deliver an ultimatum to Hanoi. If Nixon’s time was running out at home, so was Hanoi’s reprieve from an American blitz. Nixon would go for broke to end the war on what he considered honorable terms.538

Vietnamization in Vietnam

The two Vietnams had the most to gain and the most to lose from Vietnamization. The South Vietnamese accepted the first withdrawal announcement with a mixture of relief and pride. Contrary to Saigon’s fearful expectations, Nixon had neither demanded President Nguyen Van Thieu’s resignation nor announced a significant reduction in

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538 RN at 5/15/1969 NSC meeting quoted in Editorial Note, FRUS, 1969-1976, 6:219; and Safire, Before the Fall, 141.
America’s fighting force. Given ongoing U.S. material assistance and sufficient time, many in Saigon believed they could gradually assume the burden of the war.

In Hanoi, Vietnamization also created tentative optimism. The Vietnamese Communists’ principal demand was a unilateral American exit from Indochina. Vietnamization seemingly conceded this point as U.S. soldiers would progressively return home. But choosing to wait out the Americans had its own risks, and Hanoi gambled the American appetite for reductions would outpace the RVNAF’s growing strength. In short, all sides took the Midway withdrawal announcement in stride as they pressed on to secure their visions of Vietnam.

Preceding Midway, many South Vietnamese feared Nixon was meeting Thieu to impose new demands. Popular and editorial opinion dreaded a sell-out or at least American pressure to form a coalition government with the Communists. Thieu’s stand against the October 1968 bombing halt and Paris negotiations had proven that he was no U.S. puppet, but the populace continued to fear that the Americans would cut off aid, precipitously withdraw, or instigate a coup against the Thieu government in order to achieve some semblance of peace. Acting on these worries, the South Vietnamese House and Senate passed resolutions on June 6 against any coalition government. As the Australian ambassador to South Vietnam observed, “The principal organized pressures in Saigon are in the direction of a harder rather than a softer line, in spite of the widespread but ineffective desire for peace.” Politicians and journalists urged Thieu to stand firm and resist Nixon’s assumed demands for additional political and diplomatic concessions.539

So pervasive were Vietnamese fears that Nixon would demand a coalition government, relief rather than shock characterized their reaction to the beginning of troop withdrawals. Thieu had prepared the populace for this eventuality and so the reductions came as no surprise. If anything, the 25,000-man withdrawal was less than they expected, and they assumed America would increase its military and economic aid in exchange for reductions. Indeed, most interpreted Vietnamization as proof of South Vietnamese improvement and their readiness to assume any burden in the cause of national defense. Though the South Vietnamese recognized Vietnamization’s real aim was to placate American opinion, most believed Nixon could withdraw even more troops so long as the necessary aid continued. Some in Saigon rightly identified Vietnamization as the “U.S. Dollar and Vietnamese Blood Sharing Plan,” but the majority saw it as an opportunity to “do things the Vietnamese way,” avoiding the overuse of firepower. As the British embassy reported, “Few Viet-Namese seem particularly concerned about the immediate withdrawal of 25,000. Some...are quite content that [Americans] are leaving the Delta, since they had a reputation for being somewhat indiscriminate in their identification of V.C. and have undoubtedly killed a good number of civilians as a result.” And indeed, this unit (the 9th Infantry Division) was responsible for some of the war’s highest rates of civilian casualties.540 Greatly relieved that Nixon had not forced Thieu’s abdication or the

formation of a coalition with the NLF, the South Vietnamese gladly accepted a U.S. reduction program ostensibly predicated on Vietnamese strength.541

President Thieu’s political standing rose sharply in the days after Midway. Thieu had the image of a determined nationalist who, they supposed, had stood up to American impatience and pressure to form a coalition government with the NLF. To reassure the hawks, Thieu struck a tough line in a June 9 press conference. He distinguished between the “replacement” of American forces with Vietnamese and that “defeatist term…‘withdrawal’.” He also condemned those that would advocate a coalition government. The South Vietnamese public largely applauded this harsh rejection. Thieu also sought to broaden his domestic appeal while improving his image abroad. On July 11, he announced his willingness to accept a settlement with internationally supervised, free elections, open to NLF participation. Thieu previously considered any talk of Communist political participation traitorous, and South Vietnamese anticommunists condemned this apparent move towards conciliation. Thieu was confident in the government’s political and military situation and he hoped this move would buy his regime more time with international opinion. As foreign analysts noted, the people might not universally love President Thieu but he could defeat the Communists in an election. Overall, Australian ambassador R.L. Harry reported that given the gains in the months preceding and following Midway, the “Thieu Government has good grounds for its claim to represent the people of

South Viet-Nam. Thieu himself has probably increased his popular support.” Vietnamization had not hurt his legitimacy or his leadership.542

This South Vietnamese optimism was contingent on the same U.S. domestic factors that had motivated Vietnamization’s creation, though. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker rightly argued, “If the pace of our troop reductions takes place at a pace faster than the Vietnamese are confident that they can take over, it could destroy their self-confidence and all that we have built up here step by painful step.”543 If America’s uncertain domestic situation dictated hasty withdrawals, then the South Vietnamese situation could crumble in an instant.

Leaders in North Vietnam recognized this truth and so carefully followed American developments. Reporting from Hanoi, British diplomat Gordon Philo cabled that from there the Nixon administration seemed to be under incredible domestic pressure for peace. This sense was due not to Communist propaganda “but the reporting of non-communist news media and even the American press itself.” Philo doubted the U.S. situation was as weak as reports suggested, yet he observed, “The crux of the matter is that from the point of view of Hanoi’s intentions the facts of American opinion count for less than what Hanoi


believes the facts to be.” Vietnamization thus confirmed American weakness as Nixon gave in to popular pressures.\textsuperscript{544}

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam had its own domestic problems. Desertion and sagging morale worried the Communist leadership. Although the bombing halt and expectations of peace had buoyed popular sentiment, by mid-1969, this national fervor had diminished. The actual impact of any war-weariness was negligible, though. Le Duan and the Politburo reasserted their control by tightening labor discipline and cracking down on the black market as well as suspected reactionaries. Waning enthusiasm was troublesome but it in no way hindered their ability to continue fighting.\textsuperscript{545}

More worrisome was North Vietnam’s international difficulties. China had interpreted Hanoi’s decision to pursue negotiations as an ideological move towards the Soviet Union, and in the context of the widening Sino-Soviet split, Beijing would not tolerate this development. China reduced North Vietnamese assistance, stopped the flow of Soviet military and economic aid to North Vietnam through China, and pulled all its antiaircraft personnel out by March 1969. Hanoi also had the growing fear that Nixon’s triangular diplomacy and linkage would work, possibly jeopardizing their relationship with their last great power patron. Meanwhile, in the South, pacification took a toll on

Communist efforts there. The number of recruits and amount of food supplies both diminished. Despite these problems, Hanoi believed the war was still winnable.\textsuperscript{546}

Although Politburo moderates wanted to reduce hostilities and return to protracted warfare, Le Duan kept his “talking while fighting” strategy. Le Duan recognized that the military situation had turned against his forces, reducing North Vietnam’s bargaining position in Paris. Hanoi mobilized and deployed its soldiers to replace 1968’s losses while strengthening North Vietnamese infrastructure and air defense in anticipation of resumed American bombing. Le Duan also launched two Southern offensives in the first half of 1969. Le Duan would not abandon his goal of reunifying Vietnam under socialist control; he needed time to regroup and then regain the initiative so that he could dictate the terms in Paris.\textsuperscript{547}

As for talking, Hanoi created the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG) on June 6 to coincide with the Midway meeting. Though it adopted the veneer of legitimacy and claimed to represent the Southern people, the PRG was a North Vietnamese diplomatic tool controlled by their Paris diplomats Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy. As the British appreciated at the time, the PRG’s formation was a “tactical manoeuvre” lacking “any of the real attributes of Government.” The PRG gave the NLF formal political and diplomatic leverage against the Thieu regime, especially as its spokespersons did global tours, successfully garnering international attention and support.


\textsuperscript{547} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi's War}, 129-130; and Ang, \textit{Ending the Vietnam War}, 19-20.
The PRG would also attempt to buy Le Duan more time on the battlefield by serving as a rallying point for Thieu’s detractors in and outside of South Vietnam.548

Faced with Nixon’s punishing military pressure in the South, Le Duan altered his strategy in July, suspending his goal of decisive military victory. As set forth in COSVN Resolution 9, Communist forces would continue their strategic offensive but prepare for a prolonged war. Hanoi well remembered the French “yellowing” strategy in the First Indochina War, and so Communists anticipated Nixon’s Vietnamization and acknowledged its domestic purpose. Tactically, Resolution 9 then focused military attention on inflicting U.S. casualties to weaken American resolve, increasing public pressure for sizable and frequent withdrawals and thereby crippling the allied war and pacification efforts. As Kissinger understood, the directive also ordered local operatives “to play on popular fears of the consequences of the withdrawal” to increase the number of South Vietnamese converts. In the long run, Vietnamization could endanger North Vietnam’s conquest of the South, but by husbanding its resources, encouraging further U.S. reductions, and exploiting Vietnamization’s propaganda value, Hanoi hoped to cripple the program before it became viable.549

Overall, Vietnamese Communist forces had suffered much over the years, and the new U.S. president had not given them any reprieve. Yet, America’s internal travails heartened the leaders and the people. Vietnamization withdrawals afforded some hope.

548 Brigham, Guerilla Diplomacy, 85-87; Ang, Ending the Vietnam War, 24; Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 140, 192; and Cabinet notes, South East Asian Department, “Item 2: Overseas Affairs Vietnam,” 6/12/1969, FCO 15/1068, PRO.

549 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 129-130; Ang, Ending the Vietnam War, 18, 22; Brigham, Guerilla Diplomacy, 85; telegram no. 24, Gordon Philo, “Hanoi and American Public Opinion,” Hanoi 5/12/1969, FCO 15/1087, PRO; and memo, HAK to RN, “Morning Briefing Items,” 8/20/1969, NSC 10:2, RNPLM.
Thinking back to 1969, one Communist veteran recalled, “We knew that even though we faced tremendous difficulties, so did they. They had terrible problems, especially at home. We don’t think their government could stand it in the long run. That gave me heart.”

**Going for Broke**

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did not think their government or public could stand the war in the long run either. 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 without giving into it completely. Nixon bought time to achieve U.S. goals in South Vietnam. Laird’s strategy did not please every American policymaker, though.

After Midway, 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. Kissinger explained to the press, “If it turns out that judgment [on withdrawals] is wrong, then the whole replacement program will have consequences other than those that we intend.”

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550 Anonymous veteran quoted in Ang, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side*, 137.
South Vietnam would fall, taking American credibility and internationalism with it. 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. Picking up where he left off in April, Kissinger proposed that the administration make the most generous concessions possible to North Vietnam and then give them a deadline to accept these terms. If Hanoi still refused to bargain, then Kissinger argued 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.\(^{552}\)

That summer, Nixon agreed to Kissinger’s plans and decided to “go for broke.” Nixon recalled that during this period he and Kissinger “developed an elaborate orchestration of diplomatic, military, and publicity pressures [they] would bring to bear on Hanoi.”\(^{553}\) Beginning with Vietnamization, Nixon attempted to rally support at home. He also traveled abroad to reassure allies that reductions and changes in U.S. grand strategy did not mean an abandonment of Indochina or other commitments. To friends, Nixon hinted that as his patience wore thin, escalation remained a serious option. To enemies, he left little doubt that he had issued an ultimatum. If the world spent the summer reacting to Vietnamization, Nixon took successive steps away from that program and towards a more militant strategy.

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\(^{553}\) RN, *RN*, 393.
As administration enthusiasm waned after Midway, an increasing number of memos critical of South Vietnam and Vietnamization reached Kissinger’s desk. NSC staff member Dean Moor noted South Vietnam’s systemic manpower shortages and that “at present rates of loss both through casualties and desertions, Saigon will not be able to do the job with the available personnel.” The White House had predicated Vietnamization on continued expansion of ARVN forces, but Moor called this assumption into question. Moor then sent Kissinger a memo summarizing South Vietnam’s growing economic distress as inflation and government budget deficits threatened to cripple the economic and political aspects of Vietnamization. With Morton Halperin, Moor sent a third memo, this time casting doubt on Saigon’s control of the countryside and so challenging the progress of pacification.\(^{554}\)

Time also seemed ever against Vietnamization. In his June 26 conversation with Kissinger, Ambassador Bui Diem noted South Vietnam’s increased optimism after Midway but expressed his concern “that international and U.S. public opinion might not allow enough time for the GVN to succeed in doing all it would have to do.” In Paris, Richard Holbrooke agreed with this sentiment informing Kissinger staffer Anthony Lake that Hanoi had “substantially hardened their negotiating position in the last two months.” The North Vietnamese seemed willing to pay any price for reunification and were preparing to continue fighting into the 1970s while adopting a diplomatic strategy intent on undermining Washington-Saigon relations. More importantly, Holbrooke argued

Vietnamization might buy “time with the American public” but fail to end the war on acceptable terms. America should settle while it could by proposing a cease-fire and then continuing to compromise with Hanoi until they struck a deal.\footnote{Memorandum of Conversation, 6/26/1969, 7-8:20pm, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:272; and memo, Richard Holbrooke to Tony Lake, 6/21/1969, NSC 1046:9, RNPLM.}

Meanwhile, Nixon seemed to confirm the rapid Vietnamization of the war when he responded to former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford’s summer \textit{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.\footnote{Britain’s ambassador in Saigon, C.M. MacLehose, provided a different take on Clifford’s article. In a memo back to Whitehall, he wrote, “In general, I found the article conveyed what I would call the ‘businessman’s’ approach to foreign affairs. ‘If you don’t get a quick profit, get out’ might sum it up.” See memo, C.M. MacLehose, Saigon 7/1/1969, FCO 15/1041, PRO.} 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 remove troops “in accordance with a definite schedule and with a specific end point.” According to Clifford, Nixon’s Vietnamization program was vague and withdrew troops too slowly.\footnote{Clark M. Clifford, “A Viet Nam Reappraisal: The Personal History of One Man’s View and How It Evolved,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 47, (July, 1969): 602-603, 613, 617, 619, 622.}
President Nixon responded to Clifford’s article in a June 19 news conference. The president not only justly 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, 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.\footnote{RN, “The President’s News Conference,” 7/19/1969, from Woolley and Peters, \textit{The American Presidency Project} at \url{http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2106} (accessed 8/9/2013). As for the relationship between Nixon’s faith in a quick termination of the war and his response to Clifford, see memorandum of conversation, Saigon 7/30/1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:324.}

Kissinger feared that the president’s statements jeopardized that outcome, though. He considered unilateral troop withdrawals a bad policy, and Nixon’s promise to have more than 100,000 troops out by the end of the year only intensified the National Security Advisor’s anxiety. 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.”\footnote{HAK, \textit{WHY}, 275.} 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.\textsuperscript{560}

In late June and early July, Kissinger hit back hard against Laird’s Vietnamization, building the case that the program might not work and that Nixon should instead give peace one last chance and then act on their April threat to punish Hanoi. Kissinger wrote, “I do not believe the Vietnamese armed forces will be able to achieve the necessary combat effectiveness within the timeframe visualized under the Vietnamization game plan. This underlines the need for reciprocal withdrawals by the NVA.” But steady unilateral withdrawals precluded this type of settlement, and negotiations could take longer than public opinion would allow, forcing faster reductions. He argued, “Withdrawal, at some point becomes irreversible even if Hanoi steps up upon its efforts.” In turn, accelerated withdrawals undermined South Vietnamese confidence in the Thieu government while bolstering Hanoi’s belief that they could wait out the United States. Kissinger reminded the president that he would bear responsibility for any settlement even after a decent interval had elapsed. Kissinger concluded, “I believe that the point is approaching where we may be forced to choose between Vietnamization and political negotiations.”\textsuperscript{561}

In reality, Kissinger was preparing President Nixon to move in a third direction—military escalation designed to secure a negotiated settlement. Haldeman recorded that with Rogers and Laird “constantly pushing for faster and faster withdrawal,” Kissinger

\textsuperscript{560} Haldeman, \textit{The Haldeman Diaries}, 65.
“wants to push for some escalation, enough to get us a reasonable bargain for a settlement within six months.” To this end, Kissinger partnered with committed hawks like General Wheeler to work on secret contingency plans. With Hanoi unwilling to countenance mutual withdrawal, the White House would have to delay Vietnamization and take other measures to compel their capitulation.⁵⁶²

Unlike Kissinger, Nixon did not see Vietnamization and negotiations as mutually exclusive and after Midway continued to pursue both courses. Nixon saw Midway as “a political triumph,” buying him time to develop an effective Vietnam strategy. Seeing Kissinger’s plans, Morton Halperin informed Daniel Ellsberg, “Nixon’s staying in; he’s not getting out.” With reductions sustaining public opinion, Nixon could continue the war and threaten further escalation.⁵⁶³

As the summer progressed, Nixon’s policies moved in this direction. When Kissinger met Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on June 11, the latter confirmed that the Soviets had relayed their April discussion to Hanoi. Dobrynin asked if Nixon wanted the Soviets to forward “an ultimatum.” Kissinger reiterated the president would end the war “one way or another” and would not allow Hanoi to erode public support. Nixon read incoming intelligence with a view toward Kissinger’s escalation planning. When the CIA reported “war-weariness” among the North Vietnamese people, Nixon requested Kissinger’s insight, wondering how their “anticipated action” would affect enemy morale. Nixon also backed Kissinger’s partnership with Wheeler, wanting the pair to ascertain the

feasibility of hitting North Vietnam. And he requested that they keep this planning strictly “in our circle.” The hawks were again gathering strength. By early July, Nixon had decided to “go for broke”; Hanoi would either enter the talks in earnest or suffer unprecedented military pressure. Of course, such a policy elicited open opposition from other Cabinet members, which came out at the July 7 NSC Executive Committee meeting aboard the presidential yacht, the Sequoia.564

The principal topic on the Sequoia was the apparent lull in the ground war.565 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. 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.566

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565 Nixon, Laird, Rogers, Kissinger, Wheeler, Attorney General John Mitchell, and General Robert Cushman (Deputy CIA Director) attended this special session.

566 HAK, WHY, 276; and Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, 151.
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.\textsuperscript{567} 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. Laird explained on the \textit{Sequoia} that the mission was no longer one of “maximum pressure” on the enemy but “maximum assistance” to the South Vietnamese. 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 Laird’s \textit{own} use, the President has not excluded the possibility that he could take the option to the right in order to wind up the war quickly.” Indeed, Kissinger left the \textit{Sequoia} meeting more determined than ever to develop an alternative policy based on military escalation, not disengagement.\textsuperscript{568}

\textbf{Around the World with Richard Nixon}

Already, Nixon and Kissinger had conveyed informal ultimatums to Hanoi via the Soviets, and on July 15, Nixon sent a personal letter to Ho Chi Minh imploring him to settle as “delay” would only “increase the dangers and multiply the suffering.” Nixon and Kissinger also delivered the ultimatum as they traveled abroad in late July and early August, giving friend and foe alike advanced warning of their schemes. Although the Guam or Nixon Doctrine received top billing, Nixon intended his summer global tour to

\textsuperscript{567} Sorley, \textit{Thunderbolt}, 255.
\textsuperscript{568} Van Atta, \textit{With Honor}, 204-205; and Telcon, Laird and HAK, 10:40 a.m., 7/8/1969, HAK Telcons 2:3, RNPLM.
reaffirm America’s commitments to its Asian allies and lay the groundwork for ending the Vietnam War through force.\textsuperscript{569}

President Nixon departed for the Pacific and Asia on July 23 to share in the jubilation of the lunar landing and the Apollo XI astronauts’ return, but his informal remarks at Guam on the 25\textsuperscript{th} created an international stir. There, Nixon gave the news media his “perspective” on U.S. foreign policy in Asia. He noted allied fears that Americans were retreating from Asia, but fitting with the trip’s purpose, Nixon confirmed America was not getting out but instead changing its methods. The United States would keep its treaty commitments, but Asians would have to shoulder the responsibility for their internal security. America would help Asians fight their battles with Communism but not do the fighting for them. The president reiterated, “Where we must draw the line is in becoming involved heavily with our own personnel, doing the job for them, rather than helping them do the job for themselves.” Nixon explained that henceforth America would pursue “a policy not of intervention but one which certainly rules out withdrawal.” The United States would stay in Asia but avoid commitments that could produce another Vietnam.\textsuperscript{570}

Historian Jeffrey Kimball has rightly contended that Nixon’s statements and policy to that point hardly represented a doctrine, yet Nixon’s extemporaneous remarks did reflect


the core foreign policy principles that guided his Vietnam and world strategies.\textsuperscript{571} Alexander Haig recalled the speech “sprang fully formed, unrehearsed and spontaneous, from the brow of Nixon. Nobody in the government had any advance warning that he was going to say what he said, and at first not even Kissinger was sure exactly what he meant.”\textsuperscript{572} Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and especially during his 1968 presidential campaign, Nixon had laid out the principles he rehearsed at Guam. He hearkened back to his first trip to Indochina in 1953 as well as his understanding of President Dwight Eisenhower’s strategy. America would build up non-Communist forces, having them do the fighting and dying while the U.S. provided the financial aid and at most air and naval support. Nixon believed deploying American troops to combat insurgencies was a recipe for political problems at home and dependency abroad. Thus far, his Vietnam strategy had conformed to these tenets, building up the South Vietnamese and withdrawing the politically costly U.S. soldiers through Vietnamization while punishing the North Vietnamese with U.S. airpower in Cambodia and Laos. America was not abandoning Vietnam any more than it was abandoning Asia, but difficult domestic circumstances dictated a change in strategic emphasis.

As Nixon traveled throughout Asia to shore up allied confidence, he stopped in Saigon on July 30 to demonstrate U.S.-South Vietnamese unity, show the capital’s safety, and discuss with President Thieu his plan to resume bombing North Vietnam. Overall, Thieu explained that he was satisfied with the war’s direction. Given time, his country

\textsuperscript{572} Haig, \textit{Inner Circles}, 230.
would continue to expand pacification, build popular support, broaden the government, and eradicate the Vietcong without American help. As Thieu understood it, Nixon could choose escalation “to speed up the war” or continued Vietnamization. Thieu decisively chose the latter, advocating what he called a “long haul, low cost” policy that would strengthen South Vietnam while allowing gradual American disengagement. He reasoned, “You help us so we can take over more and more.” Thieu understood the upcoming 1970 congressional elections weighed heavily on the American president and while a devastating air campaign against Hanoi might shorten the conflict, it could destroy the U.S. domestic support necessary for the long haul. Thieu doubted the Communists would ever give up their conquest of the South and he believed they had adopted a “fight-talk-fight” strategy so that they could endure a protracted war. Vietnamization would give the Republic of Vietnam the resources to do the same.\footnote{Duc, \textit{Saigon’s Side}, 225-226, 228-229; Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon, Thieu, et al., 7/30/1969, folder “Personal Papers of William P. Rogers,” Box 3, E-5439, RG 59, NAI; and telegram, Tait, Saigon 8/16/1969, FCO 15/1009, PRO.}

For his part, President Nixon hinted at his ultimatums and escalatory contingency plans; escalation with progressive Vietnamization seemed the safer path. Nixon had grown weary of waiting for the other side to compromise, and he knew American patience was not limitless. U.S. reductions bought time, and Nixon wanted withdrawal planning kept secret to leave the enemy guessing and to prevent the doves from constantly demanding more. Both leaders agreed that they had conceded as much as they could in Paris and that it was now Hanoi’s turn. Nixon declared, “We can’t have you nibbled away. That is something that we are not willing to permit.” Nixon then impressed upon Thieu that given...
the stalemate, the White House would set a three-month timetable for Hanoi to begin sincere talks. Should they delay, Nixon would do something “to force Hanoi to negotiate seriously.” Nixon explained that LBJ had failed to bring “the full might of USA air and sea power” against North Vietnam. The enemy would not be so fortunate with Nixon at the helm.574

In Thailand, Nixon similarly made every effort to reaffirm America’s Asian commitments. Bordering Indochina, Thailand was fighting Communist forces in South Vietnam and Laos while dealing with its own insurgents. As historian Richard Ruth has noted, the Thai government, media, and public saw this “military action [as] necessary to maintain Thailand’s stability and independence in the face of external aggression directed from Beijing and Hanoi.” Given increasing congressional scrutiny, Thai officials assumed Nixon would have to reduce U.S. forces stationed in Thailand, and at the beginning of 1969, they were among those most concerned about American withdrawal from Vietnam. Yet, Nixon’s visit and rhetoric buoyed their faith in U.S. resolve. Nixon confirmed America would honor its commitments while increasingly requiring Asians to “shoulder the responsibility” for regional peace. Nixon appealed to their national pride, arguing that “if domination by the aggressor can destroy the freedom of a nation, too much dependence on a protector can eventually erode its dignity.” Nevertheless, Nixon swore America would defend Thailand from threats whether they were from “abroad or within.” As with his earlier trip to Europe, Nixon’s stately personal diplomacy yielded diplomatic dividends. An anonymous Ministry of Foreign Affairs official remarked, “He is not like a politician.

574 Ibid.
He could be a lawyer or a university professor.” Despite Vietnamization and a recalcitrant U.S. Senate, Nixon’s visit helped assuage their fears.575

President Nixon intended his global tour to shore up Asian confidence in America, but he did not stop in Australia, though Prime Minister John Gorton had requested closer consultation and would have benefited politically and psychologically from the visit. The Australians were particularly anxious about U.S. disengagement from Asia, and Nixon’s proclivity for secrecy removed Canberra foreign policy calculations pertinent to their national security. Overlooked on Nixon’s world tour, Australia faced an uncertain geostrategic environment after Nixon’s speeches at Midway and Guam.

Before Midway, Australian officials had anticipated a U.S. reduction in Vietnam, but the Americans rebuffed all of the inquiries into Vietnamization planning and timing. As it happened, Gorton received only a few hours’ notice before the announcement. Gorton tried to rectify the situation. He sent a private note urging the president to consider Australian needs and make their forces part of the American timetable. The Prime Minister wrote that he was concerned about allied withdrawals “because of its domestic implications no less than because of its international importance.” Indeed, both Gorton and New Zealand’s’ Prime Minister Keith Holyoake believed the timing of U.S. withdrawals could determine the outcome of their national elections as well as pressure their governments to begin similar reductions. Australian planners agreed, wondering where their nation fit into Washington’s political and military calculations. They concluded that the White House

had cut Australia and the other troop contributing countries out of U.S. thinking due to “domestic political and organizational reasons.” Although Nixon arranged for some joint briefings and consultations, they failed to meet Australian expectations. Indeed, on the American side, officials noted the need to discuss redeployment with the other troop contributing countries but posited, “For ‘discuss’ of course read ‘inform’.” Nixon would no more share his Vietnam plans with America’s closest friends than he would Washington bureaucrats. Nixon’s penchant for secrecy and public relations coups gave short shrift to the needs of U.S. allies. His blind faith in political surprises took precedence over allied goodwill and trust.576

Making matters worse, Vietnamization became a lightning rod for the opposition and the public; the clamor for Australian withdrawals had begun. Suddenly, President Nixon was the hero of the Opposition as its leaders used Vietnamization against Gorton’s government. Labor Party leader Gough Whitlam charged that Midway was “an earnest of the determination of the American people, Congress and Administration to liquidate the war,” and that Australia should follow suit. In a subsequent speech, Whitlam argued, “In its essence, President Nixon is talking about ending the war as quickly and as decently as

may be….The only escalation now possible in Vietnam is escalation of the rate of American withdrawal.”

Although Whitlam’s rhetoric remained on the fringes, Vietnamization did alter the war’s support in Australia. In general, Australians interpreted the first reduction as a sign of South Vietnamese strength and Nixon’s “good faith” but also evidence of “American war-weariness.” Vietnamization was not the “beginning of an American scuttle” but it was not necessarily a step closer to victory. Yet, it did represent a turning point in Australian public opinion. Before Midway, only forty percent of Australians supported withdrawal; thereafter, fifty-five percent chose reductions over maintaining the present commitment to South Vietnam. Vietnamization created the popular expectation of Australian withdrawals.

For the moment, Gorton’s government denied any possibility of a reduction and hoped to maintain its present troop strength indefinitely to shore up American will. Australian officials believed that so far, Vietnamization had the makings of a sound program. The South Vietnamese had good morale and were fighting well. They expected no deterioration unless the United States unduly accelerated the reductions, but they recognized the domestic factors at work. The Joint Planning Committee observed that despite Nixon’s objective criteria, “The timing and scale of withdrawals or reductions will be influenced by developments outside Paris and Vietnam, including movements in United

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States public opinion.” They further concluded that domestic pressure against the war would steadily increase, dictating reductions. Australian officials also appreciated that “pressure from Congress for progressive withdrawals will be a continuing element in American policy.” Together, these domestic pressures could produce greater reductions than the military situation warranted. To help counter these American forces, Gorton decided to keep Australian troops deployed throughout Southeast Asia and Vietnam. Leading by example and portraying itself as the indispensable U.S. ally in Asia, Australia hoped to encourage Americans to stay the course. But in the wake of Vietnamization and the Guam Doctrine, Gorton needed some reassurance as well. Nixon chose instead to discuss his Vietnam strategy and coercive diplomacy with Communist Romania. 579

From Asia, Nixon traveled to Europe to reinforce the legitimacy of his threats to North Vietnam while securing allied support for any decided action. On August 2 and 3, Nixon met with Romanian president, Nicolae Ceausescu, trusting he would convey his determination and ultimatum to Hanoi. In their August 3 conversation, Nixon reviewed American peace overtures and North Vietnamese intransigence. He reasoned, “I never make idle threats; I do say that we can’t indefinitely continue to have 200 deaths per week with no progress in Paris.” Should there be no progress by the bombing halt’s anniversary (November 1), Nixon would have to adopt other policies to end the war. As with the Soviets, Nixon held out linkage as a carrot, arguing that ending the war would improve

U.S. relations with Romania, the Soviet Union, and China. Nixon declared, “It will be a breakthrough to finding peace all over the world.” After listening to Ceausescu’s advice that a settlement would be forthcoming if America would only drop the Thieu regime, Nixon repeated his warning. “We cannot and will not just pull out. Second, we cannot and will not continue indefinitely to talk in Paris with no progress and while the fighting continues in Vietnam.” Nixon would not countenance an unelected coalition government and would instead resort to force if necessary to end the war on acceptable terms.\textsuperscript{580}

That same day, Nixon stopped at the Royal air base in Mildenhall, England to meet with Prime Minister Harold Wilson, and this detour proved significant in two respects. First, Nixon again hinted at the possibility of renewed bombing and solicited British support. In preparing the prime minister, Whitehall recalled Nixon’s February discussion wherein he mentioned the possibility of resuming the bombing of North Vietnam. British analysts argued that escalation was now “scarcely conceivable” and that “such actions would probably have caused great political difficulties [for Nixon] in February: these would be very much greater now.”\textsuperscript{581} Yet, unbeknownst to Britons, the purpose of Nixon’s visit was to confirm Wilson’s support for this very action. Second, the two leaders’ conversation at Mildenhall confirmed the quiet evolution of Britain’s policy on the war as Wilson voiced his approval of American aims in Vietnam. In 1964 and 1965, Wilson disputed Johnson’s claim that U.S. credibility was on the line in South Vietnam. But at


\textsuperscript{581} Brief on Vietnam for PM Wilson and RN August 3 Meeting, FCO, 7/241969, FCO 7/1431, PRO.
Mildenhall, Wilson argued that this was now in fact the case, and that the regional and
global consequences of a precipitate American withdrawal would be disastrous.

Whitehall officials had been developing this argument throughout 1969 and
impressed upon the prime minister the need to give vocal support to the Nixon
administration. British policymakers considered America’s defense of South Vietnam vital
to Asian security. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) argued in March, “In
any case an American withdrawal in any degree from Vietnam will have consequences
throughout South East Asia.” They held that the “Mekong [River] is a link rather than a
barrier.” Should America abandon South Vietnam, they predicted North Vietnam would
consolidate its hold on the South and then seek to expand its dominance throughout
Indochina and Thailand. Communist China would do the same, taking advantage of a
U.S. retreat to spread its influence. The Soviets were already “thinking of asserting their
position as an Asian power,” “clearly seeking to establish a stronger influence as the
Americans withdraw from Vietnam; and we ourselves from east of Suez.” Although the
Soviets sought primarily to contain China, they would attempt to disrupt anticomunist
military alliances as well as take opportunities “for trouble-making and for infiltration”
whether by supplying arms to insurgents or obtaining strategic facilities. Asian nations
needed to strengthen themselves politically and militarily with Western aid, recognizing
that British and American intervention was unlikely. The FCO noted Asian regimes were
far stronger than they had been but they still wanted U.S. and U.K. soldiers nearby, waiting
in the wings to deter Communist attacks. From Saigon, C.M. MacLehose agreed with these
assessments, noting that America’s allies in Asia “all fear a Communist take-over in Indo-
China.” These concerns aside, Britons did not interpret Midway as the beginning of an American sell out.582

British policymakers saw Vietnamization as Nixon’s attempt to “buy time” at home while he pursued the military measures necessary to achieve a settlement. Before Midway, British diplomats in Washington observed the increasing antiwar sentiment, especially in Congress, and argued, “There is little doubt that the most effective method of containing criticism at home would be by withdrawing a significant body of American troops.” Public opinion could turn at a moment’s notice unless Nixon moved in this direction. They also recognized Laird was Vietnamization’s chief proponent and guessed reductions were forthcoming. After Midway, Ambassador John Freeman believed Nixon had bettered his political position as his opponents remained divided and his policies proved relatively popular. But Nixon faced a serious dilemma: should Hanoi continue to stall in Paris, he would either have to increase reductions to placate Americans despite the great military and diplomatic risks or incite dissent by prolonging the war. In short, Vietnamization’s purpose was to buy time with the public and Congress and so prevent a precipitous withdrawal, but given this parochial purpose, it remained at the mercy of internal pressures and symptomatic of the political trend towards global disengagement.583


Nevertheless, British officials believed U.S. policymakers had grounded the first reduction in reality. Enemy losses, allied military gains, and ARVN improvement justified American withdrawals, and as the process began, they noted the Vietnamization transfer was going well. Looking at the situation in July, one British officer believed ARVN forces could handle all Communist forces in two of the country’s tactical corps and handle all but NVA forces in a third zone; only in the area around Saigon was the South Vietnamese army inadequate to handle NLF and NVA forces. Assuming enemy manpower and U.S. artillery/air support stayed the same, British experts on Vietnam predicted Nixon could remove about 100,000 to 140,000 soldiers per year. They added that “if such a withdrawal were eeked out in slices of 25,000 every three or four months, it might have the desired effect in America and should not be too disconcerting here [in Saigon].” Yet, all agreed continued progress and ultimate success depended on the rate of reduction. As the British ambassador to South Vietnam noted, there was a “long haul ahead” but the prospects were “good provided the Americans withdraw with patience and understanding.”

Together, the bombing halt, negotiations, Hanoi’s intransigence, Vietnamization, and tentative British optimism on South Vietnam’s survival paved the way for Wilson’s conversion. Nixon’s formula for peace with honor appeared to match what Wilson had been advocating for the last five years, and Wilson believed a precipitous U.S. withdrawal would undermine America’s credibility and other commitments while harming British

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interests in Asia. Wilson’s support would grow stronger as Vietnamization progressed, but the Mildenhall meeting provided a snapshot of this transformation.

Although Kissinger briefed Wilson on the Nixon Doctrine, Nixon kept the meeting’s focus on Vietnam. Nixon informed Wilson that “he was not hopeful about the prospects for the Paris talks, but that he had gone the last mile for peace.” To this end, Nixon considered the Romanian visit “the highlight of the whole trip,” and he revealed to Wilson that his purpose was to help determine Hanoi’s position. The president argued anything other than peace with honor “would destroy the faith of Asian countries in America’s sincerity and determination.” Wilson “fully accepted this argument” and reasoned that “a withdrawal on such terms would cause consternation beyond the predictable countries,” effecting the foreign policies of even non-aligned countries like India. The president added that defeat in Vietnam would start “a possibly uncontrollable move into isolationism, with consequences going beyond Asia” perhaps leading to an American retreat from Europe as well. Wilson expressed his own concern over U.S. isolationism and the European fear that American politics would force NATO reductions. Avoiding defeat in Vietnam while continuing prudent troop withdrawals seemed the safest course, and Wilson gave Nixon his backing. It is not clear that he understood the implications of Nixon’s tough talk, though. Nixon concluded from the exchange that Britain would “back us all the way” if the situation changed after November 1. Nixon
returned home confident his global tour had been a success, and he left Kissinger in Europe to impress upon the North Vietnamese that he was deadly serious about his ultimatum.585

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 made the threat clear. Kissinger told 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 this ultimatum 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.586

**Drawing the Institutional Battle Lines**

As Nixon and Kissinger were making these threats, they were also developing the political and military means to carry them out. Nixon’s summer public relations campaign intended to elicit vocal support and mute any criticism during this crucial period of diplomatic posturing. Kissinger and his staff also began refining contingency plans while

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585 Records of Talks between PM Wilson and RN, 8/3/1969, FCO 7/1428, PRO; memo, Wilson, “The Prime Minister’s Account of His Conversation with President Nixon at Mildenhall on Sunday, August 3, 1969,” FCO 15/1031, PRO; and Telcon, RN and HAK, 6:50 p.m., 8/5/1969, HAK Telcons 2:5, RNPLM.

Laird remained ever focused on Vietnamization. Behind the scenes, an institutional battle was taking shape as Kissinger and Laird each sought to define Vietnam strategy.

At home, Midway only provided a temporary boost with enthusiasm for the war resuming its decline in July. Due to Vietnamization, a majority of Americans again supported Nixon’s handling of the war, but according to Gallup, 40 percent still considered Vietnam the nation’s most important problem. Making matters difficult for Nixon and Kissinger, among those who thought about what to do next in Vietnam, only around 10 percent favored escalation whereas 12 percent advocated an immediate withdrawal. To combat his perceived enemies in the news media and build a base of support for more militant measures, Nixon launched a “Presidential Offensive” that summer. Nixon wanted to create a “pro-Vietnam Committee” of prominent citizens who supported his policies and could serve as a visible counter to the antiwar protestors. By August, Nixon’s public relations offensive had made little progress on the homefront, but military planning for an all-out assault against North Vietnam continued apace.587

Kissinger aide Anthony Lake recalled, “Plans for escalating the war were always lying on the shelf,” and the military completed what became Kissinger’s “option to the right” on July 20. President Johnson had certainly envisioned and solicited JCS contingency plans on the order of what Kissinger wanted. In the spring of 1969, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Thomas Moorer secretly authorized his staff to revamp one such

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587 Gallup Opinion Index 49-50 (July-August); Kimball, Nixon’s Vietnam War, 165-166; Perlstein, Nixonland, 421, 439; Chester Pach, “Our Worst Enemy Seems to be the Press’: TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969-1973,” Diplomatic History 34, no.3 (June 2010), 555-556; Haldeman, The Haldeman Diaries, 81; and Memo, John R. Brown to HAK; 7/14/1969, WHSF: Special Files:42, RNPLM.
plan for an air and naval campaign against North Vietnam. 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 part of Duck Hook. Originally a plan to mine Haiphong, Duck Hook grew to include all of Pruning Knife’s punitive measures but on a much grander scale. In the July 20 memo, Moorer argued that the world would interpret Duck Hook “as a show of determination, whereas a year ago it might have been regarded as recklessness.” Of course, Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy was as much about demonstrating resolve as it was about inflicting militarily significant damage.588

Kissinger’s staff quickly integrated Duck Hook into Nixon’s and Kissinger’s broader international scheme. As an August 5 memo outlined, 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.” Nixon and Kissinger had been acting on this strategy for most of the year, but now Kissinger had a formal alternative to Vietnamization in hand.589

As Nixon and Kissinger moved towards an expanded conflict, they made a concerted effort to keep Laird and Rogers out of the secret negotiations and Duck Hook planning lest either sabotage their plans through press leaks or bureaucratic resistance. As Kissinger again usurped Rogers’s power by meeting the North Vietnamese delegation, Rogers tried to find out what was happening in Paris. He frantically told an aide, “I don’t understand what’s happening in Paris. Something’s going on and I don’t know about it.”

Laird experienced no such panic. Although Nixon and Kissinger “agreed not to tell Laird about the meeting in Paris,” Laird was well aware of their machinations. Admiral Moorer, who was instrumental in Duck Hook’s planning, reported his conversations with Kissinger, Nixon, and Haig to Laird. Laird also used his many contacts, particularly in the Army Signal Corps, to monitor White House deliberations, conversations, and trips. Knowing about the secret Paris talks and having some awareness of Duck Hook, Laird constantly needled Kissinger about congressional interest in these contingency plans. For the moment, Laird let the president and Kissinger play their game of world strategy and intrigue. Meanwhile, Laird planned the second Vietnamization withdrawal and continued to use his position to deescalate the American ground war.

At the Sequoia meeting, Nixon decided to change the mission statement to reflect a Vietnamization strategy, but a policy of assistance rather than military pressure contradicted his aggressive stance with Hanoi. The president soon had second thoughts.

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590 Rogers quoted in Hersh, *The Price of Power*, 41.
and attempted to countermand the order before the new mission statement went into effect on August 15. Unfortunately for Nixon and Kissinger, Laird unilaterally issued the formal order and then 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. Attendant with this strategy, Laird and the military determined the size of the second withdrawal.

As before, the numbers game began in Vietnam. After reviewing the Vietnamization criteria and the situation on the ground, Abrams and his advisors proposed a redeployment of another twenty-five thousand soldiers. Thieu was comfortable with this number as well, and all agreed a gradual “cut-and-try” approach to withdrawals was the safest course. Militarily, there was growing optimism that if they maintained the present policies, the enemy’s destruction was “inevitable.” Yet, Abrams and other MACV officials worried whether modest reductions could sustain the home front. Abrams fumed,

> The situation in the United States, I mean—all these fine words of yours [about increasing the time between withdrawals] just doesn’t make a dent in it. If we can manage somehow to keep this thing moving along, and putting out a few sops to the pressures that exist there—keep the goddamn thing from falling apart—then we will have done a magnificent job. The pressures are fantastic! And what you’ve got is a small group of about six advisors, pitted against thousands. Don’t underestimate the thousands. That has to do with elections, and it has to do with a lot of things.

Vietnamization would buy Abrams and the South Vietnamese time to continue the war, but U.S. opinion and politics could very well decide South Vietnam’s fate.

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Laird too appreciated domestic circumstances as he prepared long-term Vietnamization planning as well as the individual reductions. That summer, he quarreled with JCS Chairman Wheeler on what would happen to redeployed U.S. forces. Wheeler believed geostrategic requirements and American credibility dictated they stay on active duty as part of the Pacific reserve. Laird disagreed, arguing that they should return stateside for deactivation due to “the psychological benefits likely to be derived from the return of troops.” Similarly, Laird understood that public pressure would eventually require all U.S. troops to leave Vietnam; there would be no large residual force as there had been after the Korean armistice. Draft Vietnamization papers as late as August 8 assumed a residual American strength of over 250,000 soldiers. Although he backed the flexible “cut and try” approach to withdrawals, Laird ordered the JCS to prepare and equip the RVNAF to handle both NVA and NLF forces. As for the second reduction, Laird acceded to Abrams’s 25,000 proposal and urged Kissinger and Nixon to make the announcement before August 27. Delay would run into the Labor Day holiday and dilute its public impact. From origin to implementation, Laird’s Vietnamization had the domestic audience in mind.\footnote{Memo, Laird to Wheeler, 6/12/1969, #67, “Vietnam, Documents 63-68,” Box C32, LP, GFL; memo, James D. Moffett to Sullivan, 8/8/1969, folder “POL 2—NSSM-36 Top Secret Vietnamizing the War, 1969-1970,” Box 8, E-5414, RG 59, NAI; memo, Laird to JCS, 8/12/1969, #87, “Vietnam, Documents 85-92,” Box C32, LP, GFL; and Telcon, Laird and HAK, 1:40 p.m., 8/15/1969, HAK Telcons 2:5, RNPLM.}

As it happened, Nixon chose to postpone the second troop announcement 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. Thereafter, even Laird favored keeping the current troop ceiling due to
the high number of American casualties. 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. The clock was ticking.

Vietnamization’s debut in the summer of 1969 met with a mixture of praise and uncertainty. International observers interpreted the program of progressive unilateral reductions as a concession to U.S. domestic pressures. In general, both U.S. allies and enemies accepted the first withdrawal with confidence. Nixon seemed to be preserving America’s global commitments and holding the line against calls for faster reductions in Vietnam. How long Nixon could maintain this position remained uncertain. In short, Vietnamization appeared a necessary, yet reasonable, gamble.

But at the behest of Henry Kissinger, President Nixon decided to go for broke in Indochina, staking his credibility and domestic tranquility on a scheme of international ultimatums and intimidation directed against North Vietnam. August proved Kissinger’s moment as he had delivered the threats, developed the necessary contingency plans, and

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595 Telcon; Laird and HAK; 11:30 a.m., August 19, 1969. HAK Telcons 2:5. RNPLM
stopped the second withdrawal announcement. Everything was ready for Nixon and Kissinger’s masterstroke to end the Vietnam War.
10. A Very Near Thing:
Duck Hook, Vietnamization, & the Struggle over Nixon’s Vietnam Strategy

“There’s a lot to be said for winning.” ~ Henry Kissinger, October 2, 1969
“[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

The debate over de-Americanization and escalation had long occupied Richard
Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Melvin Laird, but matters came to a head during the fall of
1969. In the 1950s and 1960s, all three had defended American intervention in Indochina
as necessary to defeat and deter Communist advance. All three had built their political
careers on the conflict there. And all three had advocated some combination of indigenous
self-defense and an all-out U.S. air and naval assault against North Vietnam. In 1968,
Nixon and Kissinger dropped their militant rhetoric and reluctantly accepted some
withdrawals as a political necessity. Laird, on the other hand, understood that public
support for the war had fundamentally changed; only progressive de-Americanization
could achieve allied objectives in South Vietnam. Even President Lyndon Johnson had
grappled with the choice between de-Americanizing the war or resuming and expanding
the bombardment of North Vietnam but he left that decision to his successor. Aside from
abandoning the Republic of Vietnam, American policymakers pared their alternatives
down to a stark choice between Vietnamization or escalation.

Looking back, Henry Kissinger claimed that he “never examined [escalation] more
than halfheartedly,” but that was untrue. Before Nixon’s inauguration, Kissinger had

\footnote{Haldeman Handwritten Notes, 10/2/1969, WHSF:SMOF:40:4, RNPLM; and “Interview of
Melvin R. Laird,” Matloff and Goldberg, 10.}

\footnote{HAK, WHY, 288.}
developed a plan to threaten Hanoi with unprecedented violence, which Nixon would make good on if the North Vietnamese did not begin to settle the war in earnest. Believing that domestic circumstances would not afford them the time necessary to implement a successful Vietnamization strategy, Kissinger constantly pushed the president to reconsider escalation. With Nixon’s assent, Kissinger proceeded with this plan. In 1969, the White House intensified the war in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; indirectly and directly threatened further escalation; established the November 1 ultimatum for serious talks; drew up contingency plans; and delayed American troop withdrawals. Kissinger knew that Nixon had yoked his credibility as a decisive statesman (or mad president) on the ultimatum. Kissinger and Nixon had this one opportunity to get it right and “go for broke” in Vietnam. By September 1, everything was in place except the final attack plan and presidential authorization.

Escalation remained contingent on internal circumstances, though. Reporting the pair’s “rather more ‘hawkish’ tack,” one British official noted that “domestic American pressures, at the moment relatively quiescent, are likely to be the major factor in deciding whether or not the new policy will be viable. This in turn will be dependent not only on events in Vietnam but also on the course of other events within the United States.” In late August, Haldeman reviewed Kissinger’s plan and predicted there would “be a tough period ahead if we go to it.” Indeed, Congress increasingly scrutinized the Vietnam War and antiwar forces were busy preparing for an October 15 moratorium to show that the vocal minority of antiwarriors was actually a majority. On June 30, the former head of Youth for McCarthy, Sam Brown, announced, “We want to make it clear that the 2 percent that
people talk about on the campuses are really 70 percent—that they’re not just ‘crazy radicals’ but your ‘sons and daughters’.”\textsuperscript{599}

Attuned to this domestic sentiment, Laird defended his Vietnamization program from Kissinger’s attacks that fall. Congressional antipathy and antiwar protests lent credence to Laird’s arguments against Kissinger’s escalation plan, Duck Hook. Whereas Duck Hook would unleash violent unrest, congressional inquiries, and perhaps decisive cuts to war appropriations, Laird reasoned that Vietnamization would prolong public support while providing the best chance of securing victory in South Vietnam.

As a result of Laird’s faith in Vietnamization and events that fall, Nixon broke away from escalation. What appeared so attractive in September lost its luster in October. Laird’s criticism 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. 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.”\textsuperscript{600} Nixon rejected using the ultimatum as a pretext for an air and naval assault against North Vietnam. Instead of becoming a viable alternative to Vietnamization, Duck Hook became just another contingency plan.


\textsuperscript{600} Nixon, \textit{RN}, 405.
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 after they had acted on the ultimatum. Having abandoned Duck Hook, Nixon groped for a significant theme. Laird again provided the answer. Vietnamization gave the “silent majority” proof that Nixon was ending America’s Vietnam War. As Nixon addressed a national audience, his words confirmed how far Vietnamization had come. Before, Laird’s program was an unattractive but domestically necessary companion to Nixon’s other schemes for settling the conflict. On November 3, it was preeminent in Nixon’s address and his Vietnam strategy. Kissinger had lost the critical battle over Vietnam strategy as Laird’s Vietnamization proved irreversible. Laird and the domestic context had defeated escalation.

**September: Drawing the Battle the Lines**

September was a month of behind the scenes planning as Laird pressed for accelerated withdrawals and Kissinger raced to stop Vietnamization. Reductions were incompatible with Kissinger’s aggressive strategy for ending the war within the next few months, but Laird argued the public and Congress would tolerate no other course. An institutional battle was forming, yet given President Nixon’s penchant for secrecy, brinkmanship, and U.S. firepower, Kissinger had the advantage. By month’s end, a decisive assault on North Vietnam seemed almost certain.

As the summer ended, Laird continued to focus on Vietnamization but recognized that it faced growing criticism from Nixon, Kissinger, and the military. In August, Nixon had postponed the second reduction to prove to Hanoi that American withdrawals were not inexorable and that he was serious about the November 1 ultimatum. After Labor Day,
Nixon insisted on prolonging this deferment, but Laird urged Kissinger and Nixon to make the second withdrawal announcement. Laird believed stalling the second reduction hurt Vietnamization’s “momentum” as a deliberate policy and gave the military an opportunity to whittle the numbers down. Indeed, General Abrams had backed a reduction of twenty-five thousand soldiers, but soon the Joint Chiefs were arguing that further redeployments “would involve significant risks” and that certainly the United States should remove no more than fifty thousand troops in 1969. Laird countered that regardless of the diplomatic or military merits, delaying or canceling the second reduction was a dangerous ploy domestically because it gave “people the impression that we don’t have a program” to end the war. Without evidence of steady Vietnamization, Americans would grow weary of the war and increasingly put popular and congressional pressure on the Nixon administration to terminate it.\footnote{Telcon, RN and HAK, 1:30 p.m., 9/2/1969, HAK Telcons 2:6, RNPLM; Telcon, Laird and HAK, 1:35 p.m., 9/2/1969, HAK Telcons 2:6, RNPLM; and memo, addressed to Laird, “Phase 2 Redeployments from Vietnam,” 9/3/1969, NSC 91.3, RNPLM.}

Laird developed this argument in a September 4 memo that recommended accelerating the withdrawal program. He warned the president not to take solace in the antiwar movement’s recent quiescence as respite from criticism was likely “an illusory phenomenon.” Laird wrote that rather,

> The actual and potential antipathy for the war is, in my judgment, significant and increasing. We need demonstrable progress, and the prospect for continued progress, in Vietnamization to elicit continuing domestic support across a broad front. We need a positive and understandable program, even if its dimensions are not fully defined and are subject to change, which will appeal to the U.S. people.
Laird agreed with the Joint Chiefs that a faster rate of Vietnamization put the pacification gains and military situation at risk but noted slower reductions came with a domestic trade off. And for the moment, Laird argued, “The necessity for support by the U.S. people is the overriding factor involved.” Thus, Laird proposed, with Chairman Wheeler’s assent, the adoption of a 24-month schedule to remove half of the American personnel in South Vietnam, leaving a residual force of around 267,500 men until North Vietnam agreed to a mutual withdrawal.602

This tentative 24-month reduction timetable was itself a major accomplishment for Laird. In June, he had concurred with the military 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.”603 It was certainly not the dynamics on the ground that had changed his stance, but Wheeler’s willingness to accept an accelerated withdrawal. Laird entered the Pentagon 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. 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 short, Laird only proposed what he believed he could sell to the JCS and President Nixon. He left timetables flexible so that he could accelerate them as domestic pressures mounted or as the hawks

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became more malleable. Buoyed by a recent trip to South Vietnam, Wheeler accepted the 24-month schedule in late August, and Laird pounced on the opportunity to accelerate Vietnamization. In this manner, Laird skillfully avoided a row with the military while advancing his Vietnam policies.\textsuperscript{604}

In addition to accelerated U.S. withdrawal, Laird’s September 4 memo formally proposed a radical reorientation in Vietnamization policy. Antecedents of Laird’s program 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 NVA and NLF without significant U.S. aid and military support. By late summer 1969, Laird was openly challenging this assumption and ordered the JCS to prepare and equip the South Vietnamese to handle both regular and guerilla forces. Laird believed that the insurgency was a diminishing threat whereas ARVN forces were growing increasingly stronger. Therefore, Laird announced in his memo to Nixon 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 not predicated on the negotiated withdrawal of North Vietnamese soldiers. For Laird, Vietnamization constituted the most practical way of ending the U.S. ground war before domestic circumstances necessitated a pullout. The United States could

train and equip the South Vietnamese army to withstand its enemies but it could not perpetually send its sons to fight alongside them.  

Conversely, Henry Kissinger believed Vietnamization was incapable of ending the war and viciously attacked Laird’s program in a series of September memos while encouraging the president to take definitive action against North Vietnam. But he began with his aides. As Laird composed his Vietnamization memo, Kissinger gave his staff a pep talk on Duck Hook. He asserted, “We’ve been very forthcoming; we’ve attempted to make concessions which have been unrequited and I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point.” Kissinger continued, “It shall be the assignment of this group to examine the option of a savage, decisive blow against North Vietnam….You are to sit down and map out what would be a savage blow.” After this lecture, it was clear to the NSC staff that Nixon and Kissinger’s ultimatum was not a bluff. Kissinger wanted a valid contingency plan in hand so that the president could act in November. With his staff refining Duck Hook, Kissinger attacked Vietnamization from every possible angle.  

Kissinger’s September memos and conversations with Nixon countered Laird’s pro-Vietnamization arguments so that dramatic escalation appeared the only reasonable option. Kissinger reviewed American analysts’ history of being unduly optimistic about the situation in South Vietnam and suggested that policymakers were deluding themselves on the progress of strengthening ARVN forces.  

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606 Hersh, The Price of Power, 126; and Morris, Uncertain Greatness, 163.  
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 Hanoi 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. Moderates had turned against the war and any popular gains derived from withdrawals could easily evaporate, especially in the wake of the upcoming October demonstrations. Kissinger also doubted reductions would assuage the public. 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.

In sum, Vietnamization would be a long process and domestic forces would not afford them “this much time;” if anything, withdrawals sped up the clock. Nixon would have to employ other means if he wanted an honorable settlement.608

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 to coerce a negotiated settlement. Kissinger then proceeded to delineate the problems associated with the first three options. Again, Kissinger stressed that “the fundamental problem is time.” The present policy did not address the fact that time was working against allied objectives. Negotiations assumed North Vietnam was willing to settle the war and that the South Vietnamese government

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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 was 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.609

On September 12, the National Security Council convened to reconsider the reduction Nixon had postponed in August, but policymakers spent much of the meeting discussing the administration’s options in Vietnam. Due to Nixon’s explicit instruction to cut Laird and other Cabinet members out of their militant planning, very few council members were aware of Duck Hook or Kissinger’s recent memos to the president.610 Nonetheless, Nixon used the meeting as a sounding board for the various alternatives.

The prospects of productive 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 American objectives, and North Vietnamese diplomats only reacted to U.S. concessions with further intransigence. According to Secretary Rogers, North Vietnam reaped a public relations and propaganda

610 See Memo, Haig to HAK, “Items to Discuss with the President, Tuesday, September 9, 1969, 9:00 a.m.,” 9/9/1969, NSC 334:6, RNPLM.
bonanza by keeping the negotiations open, and so the charade continued with little hope of making real diplomatic progress.\footnote{611 Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, September 12, 1969, \textit{FRUS}, 1969-1976, 6:397-398.}

With the Paris negotiations at a standstill, Nixon carefully surveyed the NSC’s thoughts on military escalation “with all targets open,” including the North Vietnamese levee system. 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.\footnote{612 Ibid., 398-399.}

Vietnamization was the final topic of discussion. With the public and Congress wondering if the administration was moving forward on Vietnam, Laird thought it imperative that the White House publicly outline its Vietnamization program. The administration did not need to give firm figures and timetables but they would have to be proactive on these announcements. Laird cautioned, “We have some time but we can’t wait until the home front erupts.” Nixon agreed that the withdrawals bought them time to prosecute the war but doubted they could ever pacify the war’s critics. As the president saw it, “There are three wars—on the battlefield, the Saigon political war, and U.S. politics.” They were winning the first two and there was a “lull” in criticism on the third. Rogers chimed in that most Americans favored Nixon’s policies but backed Laird’s
assertion that they needed to convince the public that they were moving ahead with Vietnamization. Rogers worried that any hint Nixon was pursuing a military victory would destroy this base of support. Disappointed with these assessments, Kissinger exclaimed, “We need a plan to end the war, not only to withdraw troops,” but this meeting was not the forum to elaborate his secret plan to win the war. The administration decided to continue its flexible approach to Vietnamization with Nixon revealing the next reduction the following week.\(^6\)

President Nixon announced on September 16 that the United States would withdraw 35,000 more troops by the year’s end, but this statement did not preclude a Duck Hook-like offensive around the November 1 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.\(^6\) Nevertheless, Nixon’s announcement served 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. 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 to self-determination. Nixon concluded, “The time has 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

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\(^6\) Ibid., 6:401-404.

\(^6\) Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 156.
carrots failed to entice the North Vietnamese, then they were not afraid to brandish the stick.\textsuperscript{615}

Nixon and Kissinger continued their belligerent planning unabated. In private, the pair agreed that “the long route cannot possibly work.” Nixon reasoned, “The doves and the public are making it impossible to happen.” Escalation appeared the surer path to an honorable settlement. On September 25, Wheeler forwarded Kissinger an updated copy of the Pruning Knife campaign. According to its author, Admiral Thomas Moorer, the plan emphasized “the use of surprise and concentration of effort to achieve maximum practicable psychological and military impact.” Late that month, NSC staffers Tony Lake and Roger Morris also sent a draft of their contingency study. Starting with Kissinger’s assumption that only dramatic violence would bring Hanoi to the negotiating table, they argued Nixon had to accept that the operation “must be brutal and sustainable” for it to be successful. North Vietnam had already endured much, and its leadership would trust they could endure the bombing campaign until U.S. domestic pressure forced another bombing halt. Given the domestic and foreign risks involved, Lake and Morris urged Nixon to decide in advance how far he was willing to go before pursuing this dangerous course. Finally letting the Secretary of Defense in on the planning, Kissinger instructed Laird on September 30 to begin making “fresh” contingency plans. He explained that Nixon needed these plans “fairly quickly” because “the President has a foreign policy reason for wanting

to do this.” With the November 1 deadline set and contingency plans beginning to pour in, Nixon ordered his staff to “stir up the hawks” in support of his leadership.\footnote{Telcon, RN and HAK, 4:40 p.m., 9/27/1969, HAK Telcons 2:7, RNPLM; memo, Moorer to Laird, “Air and Naval Operations against North Vietnam,” 10/1/1969 (revised 10/7), NSC 123:1, RNPLM; memo, Tony Lake and Roger Morris, “Draft Memorandum to the President on Contingency Study,” 9/29/1969, NSC 74:3, RNPLM; Telcons, Laird and HAK, 5:05, 5:30, 5:50, and 6:58 p.m., 9/30/1969, HAK Telcons 2:7, RNPLM; and memo, Buchanan to RN, 9/18/1969, NSC 74:3, RNPLM.}

The hawks had been relatively silent on the war for most of Nixon’s term. Pat Buchanan believed Vietnamization had left the hawks apprehensive about the Vietnam War but that their silence did not equal hostility. Even a staunch conservative like Buchanan was wary of recruiting their political help, though. Buchanan argued that doing so would upset the doves and inflame domestic sentiment. He noted that the press and the public believed the bombing halt and the troop withdrawals were irreversible. He warned that should the White House change either, “all hell will break loose on the left.” Congressional liaison Bryce Harlow was more optimistic, noting that a number of House Republicans were still vocal and enthusiastic for “total victory in Vietnam” and would support escalation.\footnote{Memo, Buchanan to RN, 9/18/1969, NSC 74:3, RNPLM; and memo, Bryce Harlow to Lyn Nofziger, 9/18/1969, WHSF:SMOF:14, RNPLM.}

On September 30, Nixon disclosed to congressional Republicans that he was seriously considering military escalation to end the war. Knowing that the representatives would leak like a sieve, Nixon intended the meeting to send a message to Hanoi and gain conservative backing for Duck Hook, but he had overestimated the hawks’ fervor. His brazenness shocked his audience. An anonymous Republican recalled, the president’s talk “scared the hell out of me.” Even among Republican hawks, such escalation had become politically inconceivable. As the \textit{New York Times} reported, their constituents’ attitudes
had changed in the wake of Vietnamization from “let’s win or get out” to “if we are going to get out, let’s get out.” At most, these reformed hawks would defend the president’s aims and existing policies. After the White House meeting, only Senators John Tower and Barry Goldwater voiced their support for bombing North Vietnam if Hanoi did not soon demonstrate its willingness to negotiate.618

Nevertheless, Nixon continued his public relations campaign and contingency planning. Kissinger was now awash in memos and revisions related to Duck Hook. Nixon had followed his advice thus far, and the National Security Advisor had every expectation that the president would act if the ultimatum passed without a favorable response from Hanoi. Kissinger appeared poised to shatter both North Vietnamese resolve and Vietnamization.

**Early October: Choosing the “Long Road”**

As Kissinger refined Duck Hook, the critics of escalation began attacking the plan. The military contended that the campaign was too short. Conversely, many of Kissinger’s best aides argued that the public would not stand for even a short bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Laird was foremost among Duck Hook’s critics, though. Laird pointed out the plan’s military flaws and false assumptions while predicting grave domestic consequences should Nixon go through with it. Events at home confirmed this judgment as congressional doves gained numbers and influence, unrest erupted in Chicago, and the October 15 national Moratorium loomed on the horizon. Surveying the situation at home

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as well as the optimistic reports coming from South Vietnam, Nixon decided against Duck Hook around October 11. Nixon understood that Vietnamization would be a “long road” fraught with military risks and political perils but he accepted Laird’s wisdom on the domestic context. As a result, Kissinger lost the critical battle over Nixon’s Vietnam strategy.

Kissinger’s October 2 memo on contingency operations was the ultimate expression of his escalatory alternative to Vietnamization. Of course, Duck Hook was a variant of what Kissinger had been pushing since 1967—Hanoi would have a final opportunity to settle but then face unprecedented military force. Echoing Morris and Lake, Kissinger noted that if Nixon chose to proceed, he must do so with “a firm resolve to do whatever is necessary to achieve success.” Kissinger clarified that “the action must be brutal.” For the gambit to work, Nixon would have to convince North Vietnamese leaders that this action was not one last, desperate gamble but a deliberate, relentless move that would ignore the American political consequences. U.S. air and sea forces would devastate the country’s military and economic infrastructure while quarantining it with mines and a naval blockade. “Considerable NVN civilian casualties” were a given as Kissinger even considered bombing the levee system to force Hanoi’s capitulation. Nixon must not relent until Hanoi agreed to an internationally supervised mutual withdrawal. Should the Soviets intervene and attack American forces, Kissinger argued the latter should fire back and pursue their enemies. A third world war seemed doubtful but Kissinger countenanced a global, reciprocal response to any Soviet interference. Kissinger rightly understood that any North Vietnamese offensive in the South would meet fierce resistance, further decimating NVA forces. Only sufficient popular and congressional pressure could stop the
onslaught. Above all else, Kissinger saw Duck Hook as the means of ending the Vietnam War and so its benefits exceeded any diplomatic or domestic repercussions. Besides diminished morale, Kissinger offered no evidence that Hanoi would buckle under the strain, though. As one staffer put it, Duck Hook was a “fairyland in terms of the projections.” But it was Kissinger and Nixon’s fantasy and it was becoming a viable alternative to Vietnamization.619

With Nixon approaching the moment of decision, Laird went on the offensive against Duck Hook. Although Kissinger was advocating a plan virtually identical to the air and naval attacks Laird had called for in the early 1960s, Laird understood that public sentiment would no longer tolerate renewed and expanded escalation. The opportunity for that strategy had passed with the large-scale commitment of U.S. troops in 1965 and the widespread decline of popular 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.620

As for Kissinger’s attempts to hide his machinations from the secretary of defense, Laird’s biographer Dale Van Atta correctly argued, “Any expectation that they could keep him in the dark was folly.” Laird’s contacts monitored White House communications, and he had access to the deciphered cables from Hanoi’s diplomats in Paris. Hence, Laird

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became aware of the ultimatum almost immediately in early August. It seems clear that based on his relationships with Wheeler, Moorer, and other top military leaders that he also knew about Kissinger and Nixon’s schemes well in advance of September 30. Although many historians believe Laird was clueless about Duck Hook planning until around October 1, it is this author’s conclusion that Laird, well versed in the art of political intrigue, let Kissinger play his hand before hitting back hard in October.621

In anticipation of November 1, Nixon ordered Laird “to start selling” the president’s Vietnam policy publicly, making clear that “we’ve gone as far as we should” and that Americans should stand in solidarity with their president, but Laird sold Vietnamization instead. Speaking before an audience of American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) members, Laird extolled Vietnamization’s virtues. This program was “something new” and “a major change not only in emphasis but also in objectives.” No longer was de-Americanization tied to a negotiated mutual withdrawal. Vietnamization would end the American war should the talks fail as it built up the South Vietnamese military, economy, security, and political control so that they could stand alone. Laird drew on labor history reminding his audience that the United States needed to negotiate with persistence, perseverance, and from strength. Vietnamization provided the endurance and strength to make peace possible, and Laird appealed for labor’s support. Laird summarized, “I cannot promise a miraculous end to the war….But I can say to you that we are on the path that has the best chance of minimizing U.S. casualties while resolving the war in the shortest possible time without abandoning our basic objective.”

621 See Van Atta, With Honor, 222-224.
Laird could not guarantee Vietnamization would work but he believed it was the most reasonable course available to the president.\textsuperscript{622}

On October 8, Laird sent Nixon a memo criticizing the JCS-Kissinger proposal. He began by noting that though hostilities on the ground had lessened, domestic dissent has risen. Laird doubted the American public, economy, allies, or South Vietnamese society could sustain or support a significant escalation of the war. Such action would almost certainly provoke demonstrations at home and abroad. Moreover, 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. Laird believed sticking with Vietnamization was the only domestically feasible option and that it would end the war without employing extensive (and expensive) military assets.\textsuperscript{623}

Kissinger and his staff characterized Laird’s pessimistic evaluation of Duck Hook as a “smorgasbord of speculations, assertions and evidence.” Kissinger too criticized the JCS plan because he felt it lacked the “short, sharp military blows of increasing severity” necessary to compel Hanoi’s capitulation. He disparaged Laird’s memo for ignoring the plan’s psychological purpose and for failing to compare escalation with the disadvantages

\textsuperscript{622} Haldeman Handwritten Notes, 10/2/1969, WHSF:SMOF:40:4, RNPLM; Willbanks, Abandoning Vietnam, 62; and speech, Laird, 10/7/1969, Item 1702109 USA—Relations with Indo China, A1838, NAA.
\textsuperscript{623} Memo, Laird to RN, “Air and Naval Operations against North Vietnam,” 10/8/1969, NSC 123:1, RNPLM; and Laird Interview with Tom Wells.

Of course, Laird’s strongest argument was always that domestic circumstances dictated reductions and prevented the war’s escalation, and events that fall seemed to confirm his wisdom. Congressional doves attacked Vietnam as an immoral, misguided, and endless war. Whether young student radicals or suburban housewives, more and more Americans agreed. Violent dissent and campus unrest was worrisome enough to White House officials, but the erosion of support among moderates in and outside of Congress was truly alarming. Escalation would pour gasoline on a dangerously combustive fire.

Congress was increasingly vocal on matters of foreign relations and defense. As one contemporary noted, Congress was in an “anti-military mood.” Defense appropriations faced unprecedented scrutiny. Laird was already pinching pennies at the Pentagon, unilaterally cutting NATO spending and reducing B-52 sorties in South Vietnam to relieve some of the budgetary pressures. In a September call to Kissinger, Laird bemoaned, “I am getting money short over here you know….I am going to be very money hungry.” Laird argued that Duck Hook would be too costly—financially and politically.\footnote{“Military Cutbacks…” \textit{New York Times}, August 27, 1969, p. 42; HAK, \textit{WHY}, 396; Telecons, Laird and HAK, 5:05, 5:30, 5:50, and 6:58 p.m., 9/30/1969, HAK Telecons 2:7, RNPLM.}

As for Vietnam, congressional doves were dissatisfied with President Nixon’s efforts to end the war, and a sampling of senatorial opinion provides a sense of where Nixon’s critics stood. Members of Congress introduced eleven antiwar resolutions early
that fall, though they lacked the numbers to enact them. Republican Senator Jacob Javits of New York wanted the president to speed up withdrawals. Javits proposed a resolution that would repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution and withdraw all U.S. combat forces by the end of 1970. Javits reasoned that the war had to end to restore “domestic tranquility and national unity.” He argued, “With the mood of the nation once again outpacing the actions of the Congress, the time has come to move beyond mere exhortations. The Congress must face up to its responsibilities and capabilities for bringing an end to the war.” Javits’s New York colleague, Charles Goodell, similarly proposed an amendment that would suspend war funding on December 1, 1970. Doves lacked the numbers to reduce Vietnam appropriations, but Laird and Nixon believed the day was fast approaching when Congress might begin doing its own cutting.626

Attacking the war from the center, Senator J. William Fulbright demanded Nixon dispense with the Thieu regime for the sake of peace. As Fulbright saw it, Nixon had had nine months to end the war and yet the fighting continued. Fulbright opposed Vietnamization. He explained, “When we say withdrawal, we are talking about the liquidation of this war. Withdrawal is simply one of the means to that end.” Conversely, Vietnamization perpetuated Thieu’s rule and prolonged the conflict. Becoming the symbol of the moderate antiwarrior, Fulbright applauded civil protest while ridiculing Nixon’s efforts to snuff out dissent. Fulbright declared to the Senate, “Rather than a moratorium

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on criticism, which kills no one, we who criticize continuation of the war seek, instead, a moratorium on killing.”

The Nixon administration had anxiously watched the antiwar movement all year, and the upcoming October 15 Moratorium heightened fears that any escalation would provoke severe unrest at home. In August and September, officials predicted they would witness unprecedented unrest and polarization that fall. Early October protests surrounding the Chicago trial of those allegedly responsible for last year’s violence at the Democratic National Convention lent legitimacy to these fears. An antiwar bombing of a police statue as well as vandalism and wanton destruction marked these “Days of Rage.” In actuality, the number of radicals was quite small and they proved ineffective at catalyzing revolution or dissent. Yet, as scholar Tom Wells contended, the “Days of Rage contributed to the growing sense of domestic crisis in America and fed both public and official perceptions that the war was risking social cohesion at home.” Already officials believed campus unrest was “quickly reaching the proportions of a national epidemic;” now violence was expanding to the streets. Escalation in Vietnam would only escalate the crisis at home. On October 13, William Watts wrote Kissinger, attacking Duck Hook as an unrealistic military pipedream and noting its likely domestic consequences. Watts argued, “The Nation could be thrown into internal physical turmoil.…Widespread mobilization of the National Guard could become inevitable.…The Administration would probably be faced with handling

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627 Mann, Grand Delusion, 637; Woods, Fulbright, Vietnam, and the Search for a Cold War Foreign Policy, 205; speech, “The Vietnam Moratorium,” Fulbright, 10/1/1969, folder “Senate Floor (The Vietnam Moratorium),” Box 35:1, Series 71, Senate Floor Speeches, 1945-1974, JWFP, UA; and transcript, Newsmaker of the Week, c.10/21/1969, folder “News from Metromedia TV,” Box 31:22, Series 72, Speeches Given Elsewhere, 1939-1976, JWFP, UA.

628 Upon seeing his cohorts, one would-be revolutionary observed, “This is an awful small group to start a revolution.” Wells, War Within, 367.
domestic dissension as brutally as it administered the November plan.” The fall disturbances were only a small indication of what the nation would face if Nixon inflicted his savage blow on North Vietnam. In sum, growing congressional dissent and social unrest gave Laird’s domestic arguments against escalation the ring of authenticity.

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 influenced Nixon’s calculations. After the summer offensive, the ground war entered another lull. American deaths in battle dropped from around 250 per week in mid-August to a two-year low of 95 deaths per week in late September. The lower number of casualties gave the appearance that the Communists were deescalating the war. Although some observers, like Secretary of State Rogers hoped the lull was a sign that the war would fade away by tacit, mutual withdrawal, Nixon and Kissinger interpreted it as a political act to discourage them from acting on their ultimatum. Should the United States suddenly launch an intense air and naval campaign against North Vietnam, the Nixon administration would look like the aggressor, provoking dissent. Additionally, Ho Chi Minh’s death in September could lead to new leadership in Hanoi, and this change could translate into a fresh start at the bargaining table. All indications were that Hanoi was hardening its diplomatic position, but again, Nixon would appear to have squandered an opportunity for peace if he attacked.

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629 Wells, *War Within*, 347, 357-358, 366-370
These foreign developments made it all the more difficult for Nixon to go through with Duck Hook.\textsuperscript{631}

Together, Laird’s faith in Vietnamization, his strong denunciation of Duck Hook, and the domestic and international context caused the president to waver. Nixon had been firm on “going for broke” that summer but he progressively viewed Vietnamization as the only tenable option that could preserve his presidential standing, tranquility at home, and South Vietnam. 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.” Increasingly, Nixon spoke of escalation as a response to some future North Vietnamese offensive rather than fulfillment of the November 1 ultimatum. Around October 11, Nixon decided to postpone the operation.\textsuperscript{632}

This shift away from escalation to Vietnamization was clear in Nixon’s October 11 meeting with the Joint Chiefs, Laird, and Kissinger. Nixon originally called the gathering to improve the military’s contingency planning, but it became a confirmation for the president’s emerging Vietnam strategy. As with so many of the discussions that year, the participants focused on time and the direction of domestic sentiment. Nixon stated, “In Vietnam the real question is how long can we hold public opinion.” Although Nixon declared that he would not allow congressional and popular pressure to sway his decision-making, their deliberations centered on these two factors. Wheeler began the discussion

\textsuperscript{631} RN, RN, 404; transcript, \textit{Meet the Press}, 10/12/1969, folder “Meet the Press—NBC Sunday October 12, 1969,” Box 12, E-5439, RG 59, NAI; and memo, Moorer, “JCS Meeting with the President, Saturday, 11 October 1969,” 10/13/1969, NSC 1008:1, RNPLM.

\textsuperscript{632} Haldeman, \textit{The Haldeman Diaries}, 97-98 (italics in original); Telcon, RN and HAK, 6:30-6:45 a.m., 10/8/1969, HAK Telcons 2:8, RNPLM; Telcon, RN and HAK, 7:30 p.m., 10/10/1969, HAK Telcons 2:8, RNPLM; see also Morris, \textit{Uncertain Greatness}, 165-166, Wells, \textit{War Within}, 378, and Kimball, \textit{Nixon’s Vietnam War}, 169-173.
by reviewing his recent trip to South Vietnam. He was optimistic about the war and Vietnamization’s progress. Nixon shared Wheeler’s view and was “convinced that if we hold the line politically Vietnamization will work, provided we have time to do it deliberately.” The president trusted most people would support a sound program of de-escalation and American withdrawal and that he could maintain public support for combat units for about a year. Nixon argued that the student radicals alienated most Americans but that Congress presented a difficult “purse problem.” Vietnamization would be a perilous “long road.” To work, it required time, money, and public patience. He intoned, “If the Congress cuts appropriations then we are finished….Now this is a problem, Mel. Do you think we can hold that long?” Laird answered that they could get appropriations now and then in eighteen months U.S. forces would not be engaged in direct combat, removing American casualties as a political issue. Laird pledged that Vietnamization “will work if we stick to it.”

Conversely, Laird and Wheeler criticized Duck Hook. Both men argued that bombing North Vietnam would take far longer than two weeks to break Hanoi’s will. Laird reasoned that it would “take at least a year” and so given the predicted domestic repercussions, the White House would be better off to continue with Vietnamization. When Wheeler said Duck Hook was unsound because it was too short to accomplish

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633 While in South Vietnam, Wheeler observed, “I gather [from Congress and the press], that we’re hanging on over here by our teeth, barely able to stay in the stadium…. [When in actuality we] are dealing from a position of military strength. And I really mean military strength…. [Leaders in Washington] act and talk…as though the damned peace talks, or peace negotiations or whatever terminology you want to use in Paris, [as though] we’re the guys that are doing the suing.” Wheeler quoted in Sorley, Vietnam Chronicles, 269.

634 Memo, Moorer, “JCS Meeting with the President, Saturday, 11 October 1969,” 10/13/1969, NSC 1008:1, RNPLM.
military objectives, Nixon countered that Wheeler missed the point. The purpose 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 campaign 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 based on his Mildenhall conversation, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson would give his support to U.S. policy and that “support overseas for the US was increasing.” Yet, the president quickly returned to Vietnamization.635

Nixon summarized his Vietnam policy. Under no circumstances would he abandon South Vietnam but he would end America’s Vietnam War by gradually removing U.S. combat troops while building up RVNAF forces. Nixon concluded the meeting, “If there is a chance that Vietnamization will work we must take this chance” but he would retain the “option to do more.” Contingency plans would await a suitable provocation, but his administration would put Vietnamization first and use the scheduled November 3 speech to build domestic support.636

Kissinger knew he had lost on Vietnam strategy. Sensing that Nixon was gravitating towards Laird, the National Security Advisor grew despondent. He reluctantly agreed with Laird that Vietnamization was the only way to end the war. Trying to improve his influence with the president, Kissinger interjected himself into Nixon’s affairs. Haldeman recorded that after October 11, Kissinger became a nuisance to the president.

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635 Ibid.
636 Ibid.
who then wanted to cut him out even more. Kissinger was overreacting as Nixon fell back on Kissinger’s plan of extreme threats and posturing. But Duck Hook was no longer under serious consideration. For the remainder of the month, Nixon gave the appearance of taking the hard line while moving ever closer to Vietnamization.637

**Late October: Taking a Stand**

Ruling out escalation created its own problems for the White House, though. With the ultimatum still in effect, Nixon and Kissinger hoped a final show of force worldwide would convince the Communists of their sincerity. It was a longshot predicated on Nixon’s credibility as a mad president, but the pair viewed it as their last chance for achieving a settlement that year. Proper Vietnamization would require years of fighting and billions of dollars. President Nixon needed to build a base of domestic support for the “long road,” especially after millions of Americans registered their discontent during the October 15 Moratorium. Nixon’s November 3 address would attempt to rally the “silent majority” to take a stand in defense of the war and Vietnamization.

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

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637 Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries*, 99-100; Telcon, Laird and HAK, 8:45 a.m., 10/13/1969, HAK Telcons 2:8, RNPLM; and Van Atta, *With Honor*, 218, 220.
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 decorum and large turnout made it a focal point of media attention. Small correctly noted, “No other antiwar activity either before or after the October 15 Moratorium was treated so generously and favorably by the networks.” The Moratorium, its coverage, as well as the participation of family members reinforced policymakers’ conviction that much of the American public would not tolerate an escalation of the war. A subsequent Gallup Poll supported this conclusion when it found that 55% of Americans considered themselves doves.

As Americans protested the war, President Nixon ordered a stand down of strategic aircraft to feign preparation for a nuclear offensive and thus signal his determination and unpredictability to Hanoi and Moscow. 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.” He hoped this threatening posture would rebuild that credibility. Laird believed a preplanned maneuver was sufficient, but the pair demanded he go through with both exercises. Nixon continued to play the mad president

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638 Melvin Laird, William Watts, Tony Lake, and others all had children or spouses who participated in the day’s protest. See Van Atta, *With Honor*, 228 and Wells, *War Within*, 372-373.
640 Laird recalled, “Nixon did it because of Soviet aid to North Vietnam—to alert them that he might do something. This was one of several examples of the Madman Theory….He never used the term ‘madman’, but he wanted adversaries to have the feeling that you could never put your finger on what he might do next. Nixon got this from Ike, who always felt that way.” Quoted in William Burr and Jeffrey
as the exercise continued and as Kissinger met with Soviet ambassador. Nixon instructed him to shake his head and tell Dobrynin, “I am sorry, Mr. Ambassador, but he is out of control….You don’t know this man—he’s been through more than the rest of us together. He’s made up his mind and unless there’s some movement” there will be dire consequences.” Finally, Nixon and Kissinger ordered Laird to hit the DMZ and Cambodia hard with air strikes so that the North Vietnamese “know we are getting trigger happy.” Nixon vainly hoped these bold moves would cow Hanoi and their Soviet patrons, but his policy remained fixed upon Vietnamization.\(^641\)

On October 17, Nixon met with Sir Robert Thompson, who encouraged the president to continue the Vietnamization strategy. Thompson’s opinion carried a great deal of weight because he was a world famous counterinsurgency expert whose tactics had helped the British defeat a Communist guerrilla war in Malaya. His early 1969 book, *No Exit from Vietnam*, argued that the situation was “almost to the brink of defeat” when Nixon assumed office but urged the United States to adopt a “long haul low cost strategy” instead of resuming attacks on North Vietnam. Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger were persistent in getting his thoughts on the “option to the right.” Kissinger noted that their dilemma was “a problem of time” as Vietnamization would work “given sufficient time…but if we’re being squeezed, a bold strike might help.” Though Thompson believed “the future of

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Western civilization was at stake” in Vietnam, he told the pair that “he would rule escalation out.” 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 allied victory in two years. Nixon requested Thompson again travel to South Vietnam to ascertain whether the situation warranted this optimism and whether they were pursuing Vietnamization properly. Above all, Thompson’s enthusiasm for Vietnamization gave Laird’s program a significant endorsement.642

Yet, Kissinger made another effort to undermine Vietnamization and develop his contingency plans. Part of the impetus came from his staff. In an October 21 memo, Roger Morris and Tony Lake doubted any option could save the Republic of Vietnam in any meaningful way. Writing in the wake of the Moratorium, they believed that public opposition to the war “will grow quickly, and that ‘Vietnamization’ will not significantly slow it down. We believe that the dangers of our course to domestic cohesion will begin to outweigh any foreign policy interest in Southeast Asia.” Moreover, they argued, “In the long run, ‘Vietnamization’ will become unilateral withdrawal.” Kissinger adopted their criticism of Vietnamization as his own, sending these comments to the president on the 23rd, while composing a more detailed memo that attacked all of the assumptions

underlying the program. Kissinger disagreed with Laird’s assumptions that Vietnamization would mitigate public opposition to the war and that the South Vietnamese could replace redeployed U.S. troops. Kissinger also expressed doubt about the government’s ability to maintain unity for the long haul.643

A decisive campaign against North Vietnam remained the most attractive option to Kissinger. With the president’s authorization, Kissinger continued to draw up plans for three, seven, and fourteen-day strikes. However, Kissinger now predicated their implementation on escalation by the enemy, not diplomatic intransigence. The ultimatum would expire not with an assault on North Vietnam but with a speech designed to rally the home front in favor of Laird’s Vietnamization.644

The genesis and evolution of President Nixon’s November 3 “silent majority” speech followed Nixon’s changing emphasis from escalation to Vietnamization that fall. Its origin was in a hawkish national address intended to rally the American people to Duck Hook. With escalation off the table, Laird became decisive on its content. Initially, Nixon had left Laird out of the drafting process, but unsure of the speech’s direction, Nixon eventually solicited his and Rogers’s advice. Laird turned the speech into a platform to sell Vietnamization to the nation and have the president publicly establish it as his strategy for ending America’s Vietnam War.

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Early versions of the planned November speech proved that Nixon and Kissinger were deadly serious about Duck Hook, especially as Kissinger attached a militant draft to the plan. According to the September 27 draft, 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.” The president would then announce that he had made the “inescapable” and “irreversible” decision to bomb North Vietnam. Nixon would also warn, “Further intransigence by [North Vietnamese] leaders would only compound their agony.” A later version made clear that Vietnamization was only a demonstration of good faith and not a definitive program. Although presidents have speeches prepared for many different contingencies, Kissinger fully intended to make this one more than a rhetorical artifact, but as Nixon moved away from escalation, so too did the speech’s emphasis.\(^\text{645}\)

With Duck Hook no longer under consideration, the message shifted toward perseverance and domestic solidarity. The renumbered “first” draft reaffirmed America’s commitment to South Vietnam and kept much of the preceding content but acknowledged the lull in fighting and explained Nixon’s decision not to escalate the war.\(^\text{646}\) If anything, this version merely affixed an alternate ending to the original Duck Hook draft. With the Moratorium, subsequent revisions focused on dissent and presidential leadership. The

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\(^\text{646}\) After October 11, White House drafts started over at “1” even though much of the content remained the same. See memo, Roger Morris and Tony Lake, 10/12/1969, NSC 1046:5, RNPLM; and 1\textsuperscript{st} Draft of November 3 Speech, 10/12/1969, NSC 79:2, RNPLM.
October 15 draft added, “The public debate should be judged not by how loudly voices are raised, but how clearly and courageously the real issue is faced.” Americans would have to persevere in Vietnam and end the conflict honorably; giving into “a vocal minority in the streets” would only undermine the nation’s “future as a free society” as well as its credibility abroad. In light of the Moratorium’s sizable participation, newer versions adopted a somewhat softer tone while still pleading for unity. Nixon would conclude the speech by promising, “And we will have that peace, my fellow citizens, if we seek it together—unified and determined—for Hanoi will then know it has no choice but a negotiated peace.” Domestic unity would be the address’s major theme but with escalation on hold, the speech lacked a reason why the public should support Nixon’s Vietnam policies.647

Although Nixon solicited Secretaries Rogers’s and Laird’s ideas “only for cosmetic purposes,” the message’s content became the subject of debate within the administration. Kissinger continued to push for “a very hard line,” similar to the September draft but with references to the bombing campaign removed. The speech would proclaim that the Communists and public opinion would not bully U.S. policymakers into eschewing military force or abandoning South Vietnam. Rogers wanted the address to emphasize a “sober and compassionate” government that understood domestic needs as well as the suffering the war caused. Nixon should stress the opportunity for peace at Paris and encourage Hanoi to respond in good faith. Until they did so, Nixon would continue with Vietnamization but leave a small residual force until Hanoi agreed to mutual withdrawal.

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647 4th Draft of November 3 Speech, 10/15/1969, NSC 79:1, RNPLM; and 10th Draft of November 3 Speech, 10/20/1969, NSC 79:1, RNPLM.
Still others wanted the emphasis placed on Nixon’s efforts to deescalate and peacefully end the war apart from the Paris talks, perhaps even announcing a date for the last U.S. withdrawal.648

Laird forcefully argued that Vietnamization should be the speech’s primary theme. Despite Nixon’s initial reservations, Laird played a significant role in the address’s final drafting process. Laird reasoned that a viable Vietnam strategy must not expand or escalate the war, alienate other allies or undermine other global commitments, or destroy South Vietnamese society. Instead, it should continue the war at a tolerable cost and maintain domestic support. According to Laird, only Vietnamization “meets these criteria.” 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.’” Showcasing its merits, Nixon would convince the public that “Vietnamization is a positive program to transfer to the South Vietnamese responsibility for all aspects of their own affairs.” Laird’s draft focused on Vietnamization and linked it to the broader Nixon Doctrine. Vietnamization was both “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 America’s Vietnam War without sacrificing U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia. In short, Vietnamization was a vital part of Nixon’s policy to defend Asia with American arms and financial aid rather than with its soldiers. After

648 RN, RN, 407-408; Memo, Rogers to RN, 10/23/1969, folder “White House Correspondence 1969,” Box 4, E-5439, RG 59, NAI; and memo, HAK to RN, “Suggestions for your November 3 Speech from Secretaries Laird and Rogers,” 10/24/1969, NSC 78:3 and 79:5, RNPLM.
the speech’s delivery, Nixon argued that Laird had contributed little to its development. He growled to Kissinger, “I wrote the whole damned speech.” But that was untrue. As proof of Laird’s decisive emphasis, Vietnamization became a key part of Nixon’s address.649

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 address established Vietnamization as the administration’s primary Vietnam strategy. 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 made 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 strategy 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.650

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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 and
congressional pressure would curtail his ability to achieve peace with honor. Military force
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
supplemented Laird’s analysis, as did the advice of Sir Robert Thompson. For these
reasons, rather than act on the ultimatum, Nixon rejected the aggressive air and naval
assault against North Vietnam that his National Security Advisor 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 and the American home front.
Epilogue

“Vietnamization provides the American people with a practical middle course between isolationism and the role of world policeman.” ~ Melvin Laird

Late 1969 and early 1970 was a brief period of cautious optimism in America’s Vietnam War. During this period, there was a near unanimity of informed, official opinion that the war’s political, social, and military challenges were manageable. Policymakers worldwide positively assessed Vietnamization’s domestic and international ramifications. Vietnamization had staunched the conflict’s dwindling U.S. support and proved a popular platform for President Richard Nixon’s continuation of the war. In Indochina, Vietnamization appeared a successful strategy that would eventually allow South Vietnam to stand on its own. But these positive reports were snapshots of a fluid situation. Vietnamization might have been the basis for an allied victory, but the war was not yet over.

All understood that Vietnamization was irreversible. All realized that Hanoi’s iron will was implacable. And most foreign and domestic officials believed American credibility continued to hang on South Vietnam, especially as Vietnamization’s architect, Melvin Laird, sought to extend the strategy worldwide. The Vietnam War thus became the test case for the Nixon Doctrine and U.S. credibility in an age of retrenchment. Nixon had chosen not to abandon Vietnam, and key U.S. allies encouraged him to persevere. Vietnamization would be a long, difficult journey. Perhaps the optimism in late 1969 was

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651 Laird, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, 11/18-19/1969; folder “Vietnam (2),” Box 26, Baroody Papers, GFL.
more than a mirage, but the prospect of a peaceful oasis was far in the distance. Time and chance could quickly erase the year’s political and military gains.

**Vietnamization as a Political Panacea**

President Nixon’s November 3 speech marked a critical moment in America’s Vietnam War, but its significance had as much to do with substantive policy as rhetorical appeals to a “silent majority.” In reference to the speech, historian Andrew Johns correctly argued, “In essence, the president had succeeded in neutralizing the opposition and galvanizing a national majority behind his policy of slow, deliberate withdrawal. Even Nixon’s critics had to admit that he scored a significant public relations victory with the address.”652 By year’s end, support for the war as well as the president’s standing had risen to unexpected heights. Of course without a popular Vietnam policy, Nixon’s speech would have fallen flat. Laird’s Vietnamization gave Americans hope that Nixon could end the American fighting while preserving the non-communist Republic of Vietnam. Domestic and international observers agreed—for the first time since Tet 1968, the home front appeared to be holding if not improving. Vietnamization had proven a political panacea.

Richard Nixon had long appealed to a silent consensus or majority of Americans but as he prepared the address, he doubted he would rally the people. He knew he was no Jack Kennedy. Nixon told CBS interviewer Mike Wallace during the 1968 campaign, “Let me make this one point, some public men are destined to be loved, and other public men are destined to be disliked….As far as the charisma and all the PR tricks and everything else that’s supposed to make you look like a matinee idol, forget it. If that’s what they

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652 Johns, *Vietnam’s Second Front*, 274.
want in a president, I’m not the man.” Lacking personal magnetism and knowing that the public and the news media expected him to announce some diplomatic breakthrough, Nixon approached November 3 with a fair amount of dread. Haldeman recorded, “Problem is there won’t be [a breakthrough], and the letdown will be tremendous. Obvious they are intentionally building him up for the biggest possible fall. Even the stock market is soaring on peace hopes.” Haldeman prepared for damage control as he predicted “a massive adverse reaction” that would continue into the scheduled November antiwar protests “with horrible results.” Moments before Nixon began, Kissinger told journalists, “Probably nothing that we have done since we came into office has been done with as much seriousness, I may say with much anguish, as this speech.” As President Nixon sat before the cameras, he was resolute in defending South Vietnam but uncertain that his fellow citizens shared his concern for this faraway land.  

In reality then, Nixon did not expect the “great silent majority” to come rushing to his defense after the speech’s conclusion. Had Nixon actually believed this group existed, he would have gone through with Duck Hook, savagely bombing North Vietnam. Nixon, his speech, and his policies proved popular in spite of himself.

Scores of polls recorded Nixon’s political triumph. Seventy-three percent of Americans considered themselves part of the silent majority. Around eight in ten supported the president’s plan for ending the war. An equal number were satisfied with Vietnamization, and thirty-nine percent said they would back Vietnamization for however

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653 RN, CBS interview conducted by Mike Wallace, 10/8/1968, PPS 208:100/6, RNLBF; Haldeman, The Haldeman Diaries, 102; and Background Briefing (President’s Vietnam Speech), HAK, 11/3/1969, NSC 98:3, RNPLM.
long it would take to develop South Vietnamese defense. Among those who heard the address, only six percent remained dissatisfied with Nixon’s handling of the war. In general, the percentage of those dissatisfied with his Vietnam policies dropped from thirty-two to twenty-five percent. The October 15 Moratorium may have been a law abiding, ordered protest, but seventy-two percent agreed with Nixon that the moratoriums were “harmful to the attainment of peace.” Even after the initial fervor had dissipated in December, a sizable majority of Americans still supported Nixon’s handling of the war as well as the timing and pace of reductions. Photographed surrounded by stacks of congratulatory telegrams, Nixon was uncharacteristically euphoric. As Kissinger told Laird, “The President feels that he is in pretty good shape on Vietnam….He thinks he has the doves for once.”

Indeed, Nixon sought to consolidate this “solid base of public support.” The president instructed administration officials and congressional Republicans to build on this momentum by praising Vietnamization’s progress and deriding domestic critics. Nixon unleashed Vice President Spiro Agnew to attack both the media and the protestors. Nixon and Haldeman believed that despite his crudeness and vitriol, Agnew said “what people think.” Agnew so cowed the television networks that they refrained from covering the mid-November demonstrations live. GOP leaders saturated media outlets, though,

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654 Comparatively, 11% advocated sending more troops and stepping up the fighting, 19% wanted an immediate withdrawal, and 22% supported a plan to remove all U.S. soldiers by the end of 1970. See *Gallup Opinion Index* #55 (January 1970).

defending Nixon’s policies. With the White House’s blessing, young billionaire Ross Perot bought up hours of commercial time and sponsored a television program to promote his POW cause and encourage individuals to voice their support of the president. In the weeks following his address, Nixon’s efforts paid dividends in Congress as the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a resolution commending Nixon for his efforts to end the war. Even Democrats like Hubert Humphrey and Dean Acheson publicly applauded the president’s policies. Growing impatient with those who unfairly criticized Nixon’s handling of the war, Acheson contended in a November 4 interview that “the plan he laid out last night is the best plan anyone has ever thought of yet as to how to deal with this problem.” Vietnamization and Nixon’s feigned moderation won over the masses and the moderates.656

With the second Moratorium scheduled for November 15, the White House sought to enlist the silent majority in counterdemonstrations nationwide. Veterans Day (November 11) became the pretext for declaring “a special Week of Honor and Dedication” for the dead’s sacrifice and the quest for peace. With celebrity Bob Hope acting as chair, “national unity week” would catalyze patriotic sentiment and serve as a successful endorsement of Nixon’s war policies. Bryce Harlow was integral to this administration planning and he believed that by flying or carrying the American flag, countless citizens could show national unity and thus counter the Moratorium’s divisiveness. He argued, “In all likelihood, the display of flags would be so widespread that it would more than

counterbalance all other forms of demonstration, including the March in Washington.” Veterans Day observances became symbols of pro-Nixon sentiment, and a “Freedom Rally” at the Capitol garnered around fifteen thousand participants. But the silent majority preferred to remain relatively quiet.657

Meanwhile, the antiwar movement made a dramatic show of force. The November 13 “March against Death” in Washington had forty-five thousand participants and the November 15 Moratorium drew nearly half a million demonstrators to the Capitol. Yet, these demonstrations marked a turning point in the antiwar movement. Thereafter, the key group behind the Moratoriums, the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (New Mobe), began to disintegrate as radical militants tried to turn the movement away from large demonstrations and toward acts of civil disobedience. This radicalization drove the antiwar movement to the political fringes, and as a result, the planned December Moratorium attracted few protestors. Even the mid-November publication of the brutal American massacre of Vietnamese at My Lai failed to generate an antiwar crisis within the United States. With the antiwar movement sputtering, Nixon had one more reason to celebrate.658

President Nixon’s congressional critics were similarly on the defensive after November 3. His address dejected those antiwar senators who had hoped Nixon was going to announce further de-escalation or a ceasefire, but as congressional scholar Robert Mann has noted, the “Senate’s antiwar forces were disorganized and without a clear leader.”

657 Wells, War Within, 382; and Background on November Moratorium, Bryce Harlow, November 1969, WHSF:SMOF 11:1, RNPLM.
658 Wells, War Within, 390-392, 395, 399; and Black, The Invincible Quest, 639-641.
Though powerful, these doves lacked cohesion, a consensus on an alternative policy, and the will necessary to challenge the president effectively. Nixon’s speech and efforts to occupy the middle ground also led congressional doves to begin disassociating themselves from the Moratorium protestors even before the movement’s radical turn. In part, this development had to do with the groundswell of presidential approval from the silent majority. Senator J. William Fulbright’s mail ran 2-to-1 in favor of Nixon immediately after the speech and about 1-to-1 thereafter with a continued slight preference for the president. The Democratic National Committee observed that Nixon had “accurately gauged the sentiments and attitudes of the American people” on Vietnam. His resolve and Vietnamization program were wildly popular, and their research revealed that despite winning the closest of elections in 1968, he now had the solid support of a majority of Americans.659

Nixon’s popularity derived from his policies. The silent majority speech was not just empty rhetoric. Americans saw Nixon’s earnestness, his behind-the-scenes efforts to end the war, and especially his commitment to Vietnamization. Altogether, Nixon and Laird’s policies of troop withdrawals, draft reform, and reduced U.S. casualties alleviated domestic pressure against America’s Vietnam War. Vietnamization held out the promise of victory in Vietnam, but should that strategy fail militarily, Americans were reassured that with the South Vietnamese assuming the burden of the war, at least their sons would

not be dying in Indochina. By year’s end, domestic analysts and policymakers agreed that Nixon had built an impressive base of political support for his policies in Vietnam. For the moment, the countdown against the war had stopped. In late December, Kissinger informed Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, “We were very confident [about the future]. For the first time in my experience with Vietnam, I now was certain that time was working on our side.” Many foreign observers concurred.660

Believing their nations’ security depended upon the American people, Australian and British officials kept a close eye on the U.S. domestic situation. Their observations provided further evidence that Nixon was not only enduring domestic pressures but also building a basis for prolonged support. In their estimation, Vietnamization had been crucial to this transformation. Whereas Nixon and Kissinger approached the November 3 speech with anguish and doubt, even before the address, these international diplomats believed Nixon was holding the home front. Thereafter, they confirmed that the president had achieved what had been unthinkable a year before—a majority of Americans were now behind his efforts to end the U.S. war through Vietnamization.

In September and October, most foreign diplomats held that a majority of Americans opposed a precipitous withdrawal and favored Nixon’s policies but hedged that the situation remained fragile. Australian C.G. Woodward observed, “President Nixon’s low-key handling of the problem and his constructive policies on troop reductions and relaxation of the draft have reduced the temperature on Vietnam. He has also benefited from what was clearly been a national mood of reaction from the harrowing emotional

crisis of 1968.” The Australian embassy cited evidence that Nixon’s Vietnam policy had popular support but recognized the growing polarization and “fragility of U.S. public opinion.” Australian analysts feared that by avoiding confrontation with the student extremists, Nixon had afforded them the space necessary to regroup and build support for their antiwar policies.661

Thus, the October 15 Moratorium threatened to revive the war as a prominent and highly controversial issue. Surveying the U.S. domestic scene, British analyst E.E. Tomkins argued, “The fact is that the problem of Vietnam is now more plainly than ever the central issue in American politics.” The Democrats were in disarray over the war, but Congress was “uneasy and dissatisfied” and looking to challenge presidential authority. Given this congressional context, intellectual and editorial pessimism regarding the war, and the looming Moratorium, Tomkins wrote, “To an outside observer the net total looks very much like a sudden decisive crack in national morale.” But Tomkins looked beyond the headlines and talk in Washington. He noted that since his inauguration, Nixon held steady popularity, especially in rural America, and reenlistments for Vietnam service had increased. The Moratoriums could change the situation but Tomkins continued, “It is, I think, quite possible that this line of cautious support for the President is nearer the popular mood than the root and branch of dissent.”662


662 Memo, E.E. Tomkins, 10/8/1969, FCO 7/1420, PRO.
By occupying the center and continuing with Vietnamization, President Nixon could find a deep source of domestic support. British ambassador John Freeman noted “that public anger over student unrest is as widespread and as politically explosive as public exasperation with lack of safety in the streets.” Law and order remained politically salient and a rallying point for Nixon’s silent majority. Although the Daily Mail and other London papers decried the October protest as “The Day that Split America,” British officials and leaders understood that the antiwar protesters remained a minority. Freeman posited “that the ‘silent majority’ failed to rise to this opportunity to show their alleged exasperation with the war.” Most Americans wanted an end to the U.S. war as soon as possible, but Freeman added, “It is less clear that the majority of the solid citizens who were prepared to participate in the generally dignified proceedings of 15 October interpret ‘as soon as possible’ as meaning ‘now’ or even at a faster pace than the President is already proposing.” Continuing monthly Moratoria would erode U.S. “international prestige” and Nixon’s domestic standing, yet Freeman believed the president could draw on American patriotism to sustain support for the long haul. With extremism threatening to splinter the antiwar movement and drive off these moderates, Freeman argued Nixon should use the November speech as an opportunity to “reaffirm his command of the middle ground in U.S. domestic politics” between the Agnew hawks and the Moratorium doves.663

British policymakers believed that Nixon’s address proved successful in this regard and they praised the president’s resolve and moderation. With relief, one memo remarked, “The speech has in fact ended a period of uncertainty. We now know that there is to be no precipitate American withdrawal.” Nixon had defined “the middle ground in American politics” as his Vietnamization program and the abject refusal to abandon South Vietnam. From this high ground, the speech bolstered Nixon’s presidential authority and political support. Even Nixon’s style and delivery were spot on. Perhaps no matinee idol, Nixon’s chosen “image of the wise, careful moderator in a turbulent scene….fit the public mood.” Freeman explained, “Nobody who watched the stressful, sweating figure defending his Vietnam policy to the nation on 3 November could doubt the sense of responsibility and painstaking effort to do right that lay behind his obvious conviction that he had chosen the narrow and difficult middle path between irresponsible extremes.” With Nixon rallying “middle America” to this cause, Freeman believed Congress would move in the direction of public opinion.664

After November 3, Whitehall believed something like a “silent majority existed” and that Nixon’s congressional and antiwar problems were dissipating. Agnew’s strident attacks against the media reassured the hawks and made the news media and Congress more hesitant to criticize the war. British observers argued that Agnew’s tirades had unexpectedly received a “considerable groundswell of approval,” providing “the ‘silent American’ with a new spokesman.” Agnew along with the Veterans Day patriotism demonstrated that “perhaps the ‘silent majority’ does really exist and that ‘liberals’ had

better look to their grassroots.” Those antiwar grassroots appeared less capable of attracting a broader audience especially as the November Moratorium seemed “nearer a quasi-religious ‘rock for peace’” than a reasoned, orderly demonstration. Following the popular direction, Congress looked more amenable to Nixon’s policies and had at least stopped the “free-swinging criticism” that had characterized the legislature in September and October. With Vietnamization and draft changes pacifying moderates and Agnew appealing to the remaining hawks, Whitehall concluded Nixon was holding onto, if not winning over, American opinion.665

British and Australian annual reviews of U.S. foreign policy confirmed Nixon’s political success. As Freeman recapped, Nixon had begun the year with the deck stacked against him—“a past history of failure deriving from widespread popular distrust; election by an embarrassingly narrow majority; minority support in both Houses of Congress; and a hideous legacy of internal and external difficulties from his predecessor.” But Nixon ended the year triumphant. The president had isolated radical dissenters, calmed domestic turmoil, ameliorated public frustration with the war, and presented Vietnamization as an unassailable policy intended to bring an honorable end to America’s Vietnam War. Freeman argued, “With the Democrats in disarray and his popularity standing high President Nixon must be seen, after his first year in office, as a highly skillful politician with more purpose than many of his critics concede.” Elsewhere, Freeman noted, “Viet-Nam is now much less than a total obsession,” and November 3 was the key moment that

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changed the domestic mood. By providing Vietnamization as a way out, “the President has rallied to him on the middle ground a substantial political force that, at least in the context of the war, had not hitherto been mobilized.”

Australian diplomats echoed these findings. They too believed Nixon’s political standing and popularity were quite high. They held that if anything, his mid-January 1970 sixty-one percent polled approval rating underestimated his actual popularity. Again, Nixon had to share some of the credit with Laird’s Vietnamization. Their policies had succeeded in “buying time” at home for South Vietnam to grow stronger. They predicted Nixon would carry national opinion as long as the reductions continued. The Australian embassy argued, “The policy of Vietnamization is clearly a ‘winner’ in terms of United States domestic politics….The President has achieved a clear victory over the anti-war critics.” The White House now had the initiative and the public support it had so long sought.

But as all understood, U.S. opinion was but one factor in the war. Reduced casualties and troop withdrawals eased public pressures but other domestic developments could undermine the progress in South Vietnam. Reductions were a political panacea, creating the temptation to use them both to quiet dissent and buttress the president’s standing. White House advisor Ray Price recalled, “We were under immense domestic

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pressure to give an appearance of a kind of steady diminution of the American role. And we had to keep bringing troops out at a pace which would sustain that appearance. The appearance became as important as the fact in the U.S.” Although 1969’s withdrawals had been prudent, political necessity might override a sound policy in the future. Moreover, Nixon confirmed in a January 1970 press conference that the “policy of Vietnamization is irreversible.” Criticized for postponing the August withdrawal announcement and threatening to halt Vietnamization completely, Nixon recognized he could not stop the reductions.668

Also looking ahead, Laird told the U.S. military, South Vietnamese, and the White House that though diminishing public support was no longer a problem, congressional budgetary constraints would restrict operations and defense needs in South Vietnam and worldwide. Congress had only briefly suspended its criticism in November. In mid-December, Congress began using the power of the purse to curtail America’s commitments in Indochina, restricting aid to Laos and Thailand. As a former congressman, Laird understood Congress would soon target Vietnam appropriations. What Laird called the “budget realities” became his overriding concern and the primary threat to successful Vietnamization.669

Nevertheless, President Nixon ended the year on a high note. He had made clear that his administration was staying in South Vietnam, and rather than suffer political


censure for his resolve, the response to his November 3 speech made clear that a majority of Americans was similarly committed to ending the war with honor. By the close of 1969, Vietnamization had rallied domestic support to the president and proven anything but a disguise for defeat.

**Vietnamization as a Successful Strategy**

Historian Robert Dallek has characterized Vietnamization as “a combination of hope and illusion—the hope that Vietnamization would actually work and the illusion that after eight years of advising and training Saigon’s forces to fight the insurgency, they could finally stand on their own.”

670 From the vantage point of Saigon’s fall in 1975, perhaps this judgment seems sound. But in late 1969, this outcome was far from certain and judged unlikely by most. The South Vietnamese thought they could stand on their own. So too, the Australians and the British thought that given time and continued U.S. support the Republic of Vietnam could survive. Hanoi feared they would pull it off. If anything, the Americans were the most skeptical. Constantly aware that overly optimistic intelligence had misled them before, officials worldwide were if anything more critical than they had been in years past. And yet, policymakers the world over evaluated Vietnamization with “guarded optimism” in 1969. To be sure, there was an abundance of hope and a fair amount of self-delusion, but a prudent Vietnamization program had all the makings of a successful strategy, building a base of domestic and foreign political support and continuing military progress on the ground.

The South Vietnamese had the most to lose and the most to gain from Vietnamization, and they were among the strategy’s strongest advocates. An unintended consequence of unilateral U.S. withdrawals should have been the widespread fear of abandonment. Instead, with President Nguyen Van Thieu’s leadership and Nixon’s public determination to preserve South Vietnam, relations between Saigon and Washington had scarcely been better. As internal and external sources confirmed, Vietnamization proved a psychological, political, and military success in South Vietnam.

With American withdrawals continuing apace, the South Vietnamese accepted Nixon’s second and third announcements with optimism and determination. “Vietnamisation is now accepted by the majority as a fact of life,” reported the British embassy in Saigon. As reflected in Saigon editorials, the Vietnamese understood that Nixon’s “decisions were being taken solely with an eye to domestic U.S. developments.” Yet, Nixon’s conservative reductions along with his November 3 address eased their fears. The withdrawals were much smaller than expected, and most Vietnamese believed RVNAF forces could take up the slack. Contemporaneous polls of ARVN soldiers indicated that Vietnamization had not hurt their morale either and that they did not interpret the program as a “sellout.” As one officer put it, “You support us and we will fight the battle….But we need your good will. We can do the job if you will turn over the responsibility gradually, but, it will be bad if you pull out too quickly.” Additionally, Vietnamization seemed a political boon to South Vietnamese nationalism with the country “wholeheartedly behind” Vietnamization. Caught up in this fervor, the National Assembly passed, by a large majority, a statement in favor of Vietnamizing the whole country politically and militarily in order to minimize American influence and strengthen South
Vietnamese governance and defense. Laird noted that on his second trip to Vietnam as secretary of defense, the South Vietnamese leadership “discussed Vietnamization with enthusiasm and pride.” With the military, political, and security situation improving, the South Vietnamese saw Vietnamization as an opportunity to strengthen their nation so that they could continue the war independently of their great power patron.671

Thieu deserved much of the credit for this confidence and was readying his people for the long haul ahead. Throughout 1968 and 1969, Thieu had successfully sold U.S. withdrawals as something desirable rather than a deleterious policy forced upon a client state. By leading South Vietnamese opinion, Thieu ensured that Vietnamization did not become a synonym for American abandonment. Nevertheless, Thieu understood the reductions reflected U.S. domestic needs and that sooner or later his country would have to stand on its own. Thieu’s public statements made clear that the Republic of Vietnam would fight on with or without the United States. In late 1969, Thieu launched an international campaign to win “more friends, fewer enemies” as he sought to build regional ties and alliances to offset American uncertainty. As for future withdrawals, Thieu

informed Americans that he could tolerate a 150,000-troop reduction in 1970 as long as
the United States provided the necessary arms, aid, and equipment.\footnote{Pike, ed., \textit{The Bunker Papers}, vol. 3, 745; telegram, Australian Embassy (Saigon), “Viet-Nam—
Statements by President Thieu,” 9/30/1969, Item 1702109 USA—Relations with Indo China, A1838, NAA; and Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 158-160.}

Overall, Thieu was sanguine as 1969 ended. After his December 26 meeting with
Thieu, British ambassador J.O. Moreton reported, “The President spoke with great self-
confidence, zest and restrained optimism.” Thieu anticipated a two-year timetable to
complete the American withdrawal with logistical and economic support continuing
thereafter. “A long drawn out struggle” lay ahead, but Thieu was “convinced the
communists were losing the war both militarily and politically.” Given sufficient time and
aid, Thieu would make Vietnamization work.\footnote{Saving telegram, Mr. Moreton, Saigon 12/29/1969, FCO 15/1009, PRO.}

Thieu’s confidence hung on the post-Tet military and pacification gains, and
international observers judged that in late 1969, the situation had never been better.
Reporting back to Nixon and Kissinger after his trip to South Vietnam, Sir Robert
Thompson believed that the South Vietnamese people had decided that the NLF was
unlikely to win and that this confidence in the government along with the pacification
program had forced the guerillas out of the villages. Thompson projected that in two years
allied forces would have eradicated the Viet Cong, leaving only the NVA, which the
ARVN could handle with the support of no more than fifty thousand residual U.S. troops.
Thus far, Vietnamization withdrawals had been appropriate in size and timing and had
encouraged South Vietnamese nationalism. But Thompson reminded the administration, “We had not won the war, and the situation was still fragile.”

American policymakers shared Thompson’s cautious optimism, though skepticism remained high in Washington. Under Secretary of State Elliot Richardson remarked in November, “Most judges, including many in the Administration, were being too pessimistic about the situation on the ground.” Still, the Australian embassy in Washington reported “that the Americans are no longer talking of stalemate and the inability of either side to ‘win’,” though U.S. “officials remained reluctant to push good news” lest they invite a backlash from the doves. The State Department estimated only three to four percent of the population was under direct NLF control, though they contended the main point was not statistical accuracy but the sharp decline of NLF strength and influence. They also argued the ratio of ARVN volunteers to conscripts ran about three to one. As one American official put it, “On the ground the situation had never looked better from our point of view and this state of affairs was likely to continue.”

In Vietnam, MACV officials were far more optimistic about the situation there than they were about matters back home, especially given Laird’s congressional “budget realities.” General Abrams lived with the ever-present fear that domestic pressure would tie the president’s hand and force faster withdrawals. Already he thought his forces were

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understrength, but looking at South Vietnam, he had grounds for budding optimism. William Colby summarized to Senator Jacob Javits, “If you add up your balance on both sides, I think you come to a conclusion that a successful outcome is possible, but not inevitable.” Intelligence revealed an enemy hurting in South Vietnam. Pacification and other programs had crippled Communist recruitment, and thanks to Thieu’s efforts, over three million South Vietnamese had volunteered for the People’s Self Defense Force. Refugees were returning home in droves and the major roads and thoroughfares had become safe. ARVN soldiers were coping well with American withdrawals but needed to prove themselves in battle to achieve the necessary psychological boost. Even the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’s December fact-finding mission to South Vietnam found that though Vietnamization would be a long difficult road, it could work.

Henry Kissinger remained Vietnamization’s chief critic. In early 1970, Kissinger wrote the president, arguing that the program’s reports were overly optimistic. He warned that reality could soon catch up with the withdrawals. He reasoned that North Vietnam remained strong militarily, that there was no clear evidence of RVNAF improvement, and that the Washington bureaucrats felt pressured to make positive reports. Kissinger also wondered whether the White House had proper oversight over Laird’s Pentagon and noted his concern that Laird might unilaterally reduce American combat support for the South Vietnamese in order to meet budget needs elsewhere. Kissinger admitted that Saigon had

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676 Up until the third tranche, Nixon’s withdrawals had been in line with what Abrams proposed. Abrams wanted no more than thirty-five thousand out in the December through April timeframe but Nixon went with fifty thousand. That said, Nixon’s reductions were in line with Thieu’s expectations.

greatly increased its control over the countryside after 1968 but reminded the president that “the war in Vietnam is not over.” His prescription for stalled negotiations remained the same; Kissinger kept developing harsh contingency plans for North Vietnamese intransigence or escalation.678

Despite Kissinger’s skepticism, President Nixon remained “cautiously optimistic” that South Vietnam “would be able to measure up to any new threat which North Vietnam could mount against them and to survive it.” As Nixon explained to the British prime minister, North Vietnam’s “position in South Vietnam was progressively disintegrating” and he doubted they had the ability to mount another Tet-like offensive. Nixon also believed he had rallied the silent majority to Vietnamization and that Hanoi “could not now hope to turn the division of American public opinion to their own advantage.” Upon announcing the third withdrawal, Nixon summarized his optimistic position based on the accumulated evidence. Nixon declared that they now had “a winning position in the sense of obtaining a just peace (whether negotiated or not) and of maintaining an independent, non-Communist South Vietnam has been achieved but we are not yet through.” There would be hiccups and periodic doubts but this uncertainty was part of the Vietnamization process. Nixon responded to Kissinger’s concerns regarding ARVN forces, “They must take responsibility if they are ever to gain confidence. We have to take risks on that score.”

Vietnamization was as sound a military strategy as they could afford to adopt politically. And it was a return to what Nixon had long advocated.\textsuperscript{679}

Since his first trip to French Indochina in 1953, Nixon had urged U.S. policymakers to train and expand indigenous Vietnamese forces so that they could do the fighting on the ground while America provided the aid and firepower necessary to defeat the Communists. Vietnamization harkened back to this 1950s prescription. Moreover, Nixon was a firm believer in South Vietnamese potential as well as the international importance of preserving the Republic of Vietnam. In late 1969, Vietnamization was not a means to effect a “decent interval” between an American departure and South Vietnam’s fall. Instead, it provided the political and military means to secure South Vietnam with local forces backed by U.S. airpower if necessary. Nixon believed it would work.

Australian diplomats and analysts concurred. In Saigon, R.L. Harry reported that the South Vietnamese government effectively controlled about ninety percent of the territory. Simply put, the Republic was in the “strongest position, in relation to control of the country, that it has enjoyed since 1965,” and it was now time to begin planning for peace and reconstruction. Harry beseeched Canberra to increase its aid to South Vietnam and so speed the transition towards peace. Officials there similarly understood Vietnamization and pacification “to be proceeding satisfactorily and that the Vietnamese were to be congratulated on the progress being made.” They reasoned that if President Nixon stood by his objective withdrawal criteria, then “the security of South Vietnam can

be ensured.” The need for caution remained, though. The enemy still held the initiative and capability to launch large offensives. Though most Australian policymakers argued that the improved situation warranted U.S. and Australian withdrawals, the Australian Chiefs of Staff warned that the North Vietnamese could in a matter of days move troops into South Vietnam, causing ARVN forces to overextend themselves. Regardless of the North Vietnamese threat, Harry explained to his British counterpart that it was “politically impossible” for Prime Minister Gorton not to begin some Australian reductions after the fourth U.S. announcement. “The political facts of life” applied to Australia as well as the United States, and Prime Minister Gorton justified Australian withdrawals based on Vietnamization.680

British policymakers were also guardedly optimistic. Surveying the situation firsthand, Ambassador J.O. Moreton believed it had been a “year of steady military progress” and ARVN soldiers were bearing the greater defense burden “reasonably well.” The security situation was much better but still fragile since Hanoi could launch an offensive at any time. Vietnamization had inspired South Vietnamese confidence, bolstered nationalism, and made an end to the American ground war conceivable within two years. Thereafter, South Vietnam would need only limited U.S. air and technical

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support along with Hanoi’s agreement to eschew a major invasion. Indeed, Moreton believed that Vietnamization was a necessary “gamble which offers [Americans] the best chance of an honourable exit.” He continued, “Given time—and probably the failure of one further Communist offensive—I believe it could succeed. But it will require stamina and a strong sense of purpose to see it through.” There would be “no short cuts.” Moreton concluded, “Assuming a continuation of existing American policy, on the basis of President Thieu’s performance this year there are grounds for guarded optimism.”

Officials in London shared Moreton’s “guarded optimism.” Whitehall noted the U.S. track record of overenthusiastic prognoses on South Vietnam but declared that numerous non-American sources confirmed the British embassy’s positive assessment. Although they saw cause to worry because the withdrawals occurred before Vietnamization had proven itself as a viable strategy, they understood it was surely “NOT a crash programme.” The military, political, and security situation was clearly improving as were ARVN capabilities. Besides, Whitehall posited another year or two would elapse before the White House had withdrawn all but a small residual force. Officials noted, “In general, South Vietnam shows signs of being able to contend successfully with the problems posed by Vietnamisation and the withdrawal of U.S. troops, provided that the present rate of withdrawal is not accelerated unduly.” Reductions on the order of ten thousand soldiers per month were appropriate for maintaining South Vietnamese morale and the military

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position. This view extended to the top, with Prime Minister Wilson defending Vietnamization before foreign dignitaries. Wilson told a Swedish official “that the policy had been exceptionally fully considered and worked out and he thought President Nixon would stand by it,” especially given its “wide public support.” As proof of British confidence in America’s Vietnam strategy, London demonstrated an increasing willingness to support the Republic of Vietnam with the pound.

In 1970, both Great Britain and France considered greatly increasing their aid to and their commercial interests in South Vietnam. In the wake of 1969’s successes, several Whitehall officials argued that it was time to leave emergency aid packages behind and expand it to include significant capital aid. One such memo contended, “There is a note of growing confidence, that whatever may be the result of the various proposals for a negotiated peace, South Vietnam will be able to find a way forward for herself as a viable non-communist state.” Another memo shared this optimism and encouraged policymakers to convey this progress and stability to British businesses. Already, French rubber planters and other interests were hopeful about South Vietnam’s future and investing in the region. By November 1970, the South Vietnamese could obtain French commercial credit at 6.5 percent interest due for repayment in five years. In short, European businesses and

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682 Since Midway, America averaged around 10k redeployed troops per month. 1970’s withdrawals averaged around 12k/month.


684 For comparison, a 1970 U.S. government T-bill with a 5-year maturity yielded 7.38% in annual interest. See http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/H15/data.htm (accessed 8/9/2013). It was not the case that the French now embraced the Thieu regime but rather their reasoning that South Vietnam would have to survive for another ten years to prevent American humiliation and the harming of its Allies’ security interests.
economic advisors interpreted South Vietnamese developments positively and placed their money accordingly. All of the above developments were evidence of officials’ guarded optimism, but their doubts had little to do with 1969’s Vietnamization program or South Vietnam. Ambassador Moreton noted, “If the military and internal situation is mildly encouraging, the same can scarcely be said of external factors”: U.S. domestic circumstances and North Vietnamese determination. Since Nixon had proven his resolve and grasp of the American political situation, Moreton focused on Hanoi. He believed the North Vietnamese faith in Communist teleology exacerbated by intense nationalism had clouded their judgment, giving them an “impregnable belief in the inevitability of victory for protracted war.” Moreton’s counterpart in Hanoi, Daphne Park, reached a similar conclusion. Hanoi had no intent of ending the war until South Vietnam was firmly in their control; if this conquest took decades, they would persist. Park believed the North Vietnamese faith “in their natural and inevitable right to win, without concessions, has something Calvinistic about it although it is evidently nurtured both by an austere Confucian tradition and by the Messianic texts of the Communist doctrine.” Indeed, Hanoi faced difficult conditions at the end of 1969 but Le Duan pressed on in his conquest of the South.

Thus, the “decent interval” would have to be at least ten more years, making a five-year loan a relatively safe bet. See memo, Rogers to RN, 12/8/1969, folder “NATO Ministerial Meeting, Brussels and Visits to Bonn and Paris 12/2-8/68,” Box 13, E-5439, RG 59, NAII.


As the North Vietnamese leadership privately admitted, their costly offensives along with U.S. and South Vietnamese policies had crippled the southern insurgency. The January 1970 18th Plenum reviewed these military and political setbacks and concluded “this situation has affected the growth of our armed forces and our ability to retain the initiative on the battlefield.” The view was even grimmer for those cadres on the ground. Truong Nhu Tang, an NLF leader, recalled, “We lived like hunted animals…wariness and tension were the companions of every waking moment, creating stresses that were to take an increasing toll on our equanimity as the American bombers closed in on our bases and sanctuaries in late 1969.” Hanoi realized that they had entered a new phase in the conflict. Nixon’s Vietnam war would be “difficult, decisive, and complicated.”

Vietnamization was both a danger and a ray of hope. Hanoi correctly saw it as Nixon’s way of maintaining public support by using “Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese” so that he could “indefinitely prolong the war.” Hanoi received what it had demanded in Paris—unconditional American withdrawal. Yet, the promise of a stronger South Vietnamese military denied the North Vietnamese the advantage of time, creating no small dilemma. Should they try to embarrass ARVN forces too soon, Nixon could slow or stop withdrawals and use airpower to punish Hanoi for the offensive. But the longer they postponed the offensive with the expectation that American impatience would force faster reductions, the stronger the South Vietnamese became. Eventually, the Saigon regime could prove nigh invincible. It was a frustrating gamble either way. Kissinger explained, “The longer [North Vietnam] delays, the worse it finds itself militarily in the South—

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687 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 25; Victory in Vietnam, 247; Brigham, Guerilla Diplomacy, 85, 93; and Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 157-158.
always the key element in Hanoi’s calculations. Meanwhile, by stalling on the negotiations, Hanoi permits the U.S. to carry out Vietnamization at its own pace.” In March 1970, the Politburo decided to escalate the Southern war to cripple Vietnamization while launching a diplomatic offensive to boost North Vietnamese morale and play on U.S. politics. North Vietnam’s Political Bureau recorded that they had to intensify the war on all fronts “to doom [Vietnamization] to failure…and to create a new change in the war situation so as to win gradual victories and eventually to win a decisive victory.”[^688]

Thus, Vietnamization was not an insurmountable challenge, and Hanoi would continue the war regardless of the physical and human costs. In Paris, Le Duc Tho displayed this tenacity. He informed Kissinger,

> If you prolong the war, we have to continue to fight. If you intensify the war in South Vietnam, if you even resume bombing North Vietnam, we are prepared. We are determined to continue the fight until we win victory. If our generation cannot win, then our sons and nephews will continue. We will sacrifice everything, but we will not again have slavery. This is our iron will. We have been fighting for 25 years, the French and you. You wanted to quench our spirit with bombs and shells. But they cannot force us to submit.[^689]

Although all indications were that Vietnamization was proving a successful strategy, Hanoi made it clear that the war was far from over.


Vietnamization & American Credibility

Vietnamization and South Vietnamese progress deserved a fair amount of praise in late 1969, but Vietnamization’s promise of saving the U.S. home front and the Republic of Vietnam remained unfulfilled. To Melvin Laird, the strategy’s architect, as well as international observers, its success appeared increasingly contingent on Congress. And the threat of a brutal North Vietnamese offensive ever hung in the background.

President Nixon had made clear that he was not getting out of Vietnam but staying in to ensure South Vietnam’s survival. Nixon had staked his moral and political credibility to the program, and many allied leaders believed that America’s national credibility was also bound to South Vietnam’s fate. During 1968, President Lyndon Johnson’s uncertain policies had provoked allied apprehension. Nixon’s diplomatic trips and foreign policies began to repair their trust, but until events shifted decisively in South Vietnam’s favor, Vietnamization failed to enhance U.S. credibility abroad. With the Nixon Doctrine extending Vietnamization to Asia and Western officials fretting about a “Europeanization” of NATO defense, South Vietnam would be the test case for the perceived global de-Americanization. In early 1970, allied policymakers looked upon Vietnam with guarded optimism but American credibility remained contingent on the outcome there.

With its highly trained global diplomats and elaborate foreign policy institutions, Great Britain assessed Vietnamization’s problematic international consequences better than any other nation. Unlike in 1964, Her Majesty’s Government cared deeply about the Republic of Vietnam and its global strategic importance in 1969-1970. Historian Fredrik Logevall wrote of the former period, “Vietnam was not perceived…to be a vital theater in the Cold War, either for Britain alone or for the West as a whole. One finds nary a reference
in the large British internal record to the idea that preserving a noncommunist South Vietnam ought to be a strategic priority for the West.”

Not so in the latter period. London officials solicited thorough treatises on the probable outcome of the Vietnam War and its effect upon U.S. foreign policy worldwide. They concluded that Vietnamization’s failure would jeopardize U.S. credibility, lead to the curtailment of American commitments worldwide, and ultimately hurt British national security. Given this stark assessment, British leaders decided to help shore up U.S. domestic support for the war. Although British perceptions dominate the following narrative, other nations’ views also appear to establish Vietnamization’s global context. In short, although U.S. credibility was not at stake in 1964, the manner of America’s exit mattered a great deal in 1969.

In late 1969 and early 1970, a far-ranging bureaucratic discussion on the consequences of an American abandonment of Indochina occurred in Whitehall. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office solicited the views of its diplomats worldwide and its analysts in London. Even the Prime Minister weighed in on Vietnamization’s American and global contexts. The starting assumption was that there would be a precipitate U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam, which they defined as “an immediate withdrawal within a period of a few months, with no safe-guards negotiated.”

This outcome seemed remote in early 1970, and British officials gauged Vietnamization positively. Nixon could safely continue phased reductions for at least another year, but Vietnamization would still prove incapable of ending the war. American

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690 Logevall, _Choosing War_, xviii, 18-19.
691 Cabinet memo, FCO Secretary, “Vietnam: An Assessment of the Present Position and, in particular, of the Probable Consequences of any Precipitate American Withdrawal,” early January 1970, FCO 15/1095, PRO.
policymakers were hoping for a stalemate of exhaustion that produced an armistice similar to what followed the Korean War, but Hanoi remained fixed on victory. Eventually the United States would face two alternatives: continued Vietnamization with American support or the abandonment of South Vietnam. Surveying the environment in Indochina and worldwide, London decidedly favored the former.692

Indeed, British policymakers all but endorsed the Thieu regime, and this development in part explains why Britons judged that American credibility depended upon success in South Vietnam. On the outlook in 1964-1965, Logevall noted,

> The chief consideration for all of the skeptics of U.S. policy, whether domestic or foreign, whether in Asia or elsewhere, was the utterly dismal politico-military situation in South Vietnam. The essential prerequisite for any successful struggle—a stable Saigon government enjoying reasonably broad-based support—was not merely absent but further away than ever from becoming reality.693

In 1969-1970, British diplomats and analysts concluded that the South Vietnamese government was legitimate, popular, and growing ever militarily and politically stronger. Whitehall argued that it was a “communist myth” that South Vietnam was undemocratic and that most of its populace would prefer Communist liberation. In their view, the Republic was a relatively democratic, constitutional government whereas the PRG’s legitimacy was dubious at best. Ambassador Moreton added, “Even if the non-Communist one is imperfectly democratic by Western standards, it will still have been infinitely worth preserving,” especially compared to the “terror” a Communist takeover would bring. Whitehall estimated there had been one hundred thousand executions in North Vietnam since its 1954 creation and hinted that the 1968 Hue massacre portended what awaited

693 Logevall, Choosing War, 378-379.
Southerners. A coalition government leading to a negotiated settlement would likely have the same end. One commentator noted that those “well-meaning people” who advocated coalition forget that this same logic led to the domination of Eastern Europe after 1945. Thus, precipitate withdrawal (whether disguised or announced) would have severe deleterious effects on the South Vietnamese.  

Moreover, America would have abandoned an ally who was making a valiant effort to stand on its own and develop a representative government. Even a decent interval between a gradual exit and South Vietnam’s collapse would prove little better for American credibility than pulling all U.S. troops out immediately. One of the few British policymakers to consider a decent interval strategy, D. Mcd. Gordon (an expert at the FCO’s South East Asian Department) wrote, “Such a decision would be realistic. If the South Vietnamese cannot stand on their own feet then they cannot be propped up indefinitely….But it might nevertheless still be difficult for the Americans—and for us—to justify any ultimate decision to abandon the South Vietnamese to Communist take-over.” A South Vietnamese collapse in 1975 would be little better than one in 1970.

Although far more pessimistic than their British counterparts, French officials also judged that Nixon was attempting to make the best of a difficult situation. Under President Charles de Gaulle, France had been a vociferous critic of LBJ’s foreign policy, especially in Vietnam, but even he grew sympathetic as Johnson began the arduous task of negotiating an end to the war. Nixon and de Gaulle enjoyed a close relationship, further improving

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694 FCO Secretary, “Vietnam…Probable Consequences of any Precipitate American Withdrawal”; and Moreton, “Viet-Nam: Keeping One’s Nerve.”
Franco-American relations. This rapprochement and personal diplomacy continued with de Gaulle’s successor, Georges Pompidou. Although the French government still advocated South Vietnam’s neutralization and the creation of a coalition government, they did not resume the withering rhetorical attacks on America’s Vietnam War that had occurred during the Johnson administration. As the French Deputy Director of Political Affairs told the British ambassador, Vietnamization was integral in reconciling Euro-American views on Vietnam as each partner could interpret the exit and outcome in the manner that suited them. Hence, even when Nixon chose to escalate the war tactically, French officials muted their criticism, trusting the Paris talks and Vietnamization proved Nixon’s intentions to disengage honorably.696

And indeed, the French government sought peace with honor and not South Vietnam’s abrupt abandonment. In December 1969, President Pompidou and other top French officials informed Secretary Rogers that the French did “not want to see the United States humiliated in South Viet-Nam in any way.” They worried Vietnamization would result in “some sort of collapse after [U.S.] withdrawal that would humiliate” America. Rather, South Vietnam, even if it became a neutral country after a negotiated settlement, would have to stand for “ten years” to prevent American humiliation and damage to its allies’ security interests. Despite misjudging Hanoi’s willingness to settle on anything short of outright reunification, Pompidou and other French officials began to assess South

Vietnam somewhat more positively. They observed that South Vietnam for the first time had “a certain consistency” and “the appearance of reality. Also, given the improved military situation in Vietnam and political situation in America, they understood Nixon had little incentive to agree to a coalition government. While the Australian Minister for External Affairs could argue that the French were motivated “almost entirely by a desire to ensure that the Americans did not succeed where they failed,” the French government wanted peace, preferably through a compromise settlement leading to a coalition government or Cold War neutrality. They did not want to see the United States so embarrassed or debilitated that it would shrink from its global responsibilities.697

Britons judged that the second domino to fall would be U.S. domestic backing for Cold War internationalism and alliances.698 In Washington, Ambassador Freeman observed that already Vietnam had raised doubts about U.S. involvement in world affairs and “exposed the limitations of American power….It has led inevitably to public questioning of her existing commitments.” Freeman continued, “Clearly what we are dealing with here are matters of emotion, not logic, and prediction is especially difficult.” At a private breakfast, President Nixon confirmed that “the mood in the U.S. would move sharply towards isolationism” if the nation suffered defeat in Indochina. Freeman believed the president was “probably correct.” He cabled London.


698 This assumed of course that U.S. public opinion was not the first domino. Many policymakers worldwide posited an American collapse of will, which then dictated precipitate withdrawal.
In the event of a precipitate U.S. withdrawal, the credibility of the President himself and his Administration would have vanished with the collapse of his policy and the credibility of the ‘isolationist lobby’ would have correspondingly increased. There would be a major postmortem. The tendency to question existing policies and commitments would be enhanced; and there are no grounds for supposing that U.S. policies and commitments in Europe would be exempt from the process.

In short, Freeman predicted something akin to what Ronald Reagan later called the “Vietnam syndrome.” Failure in Vietnam would lead to an American hunt for “scapegoats” further prolonging the national ordeal and affecting U.S. foreign policy for a generation or more. The prime minister, Cabinet, and officials in Whitehall reached similar conclusions. Even in the midst of Nixon’s controversial 1970 incursion into Cambodia, Cabinet members worried that British censure of U.S. policies would “risk provoking a reaction in the United States in favour of isolationism.” They further observed that Vietnam had so fractured and stressed American society that the conflict “might strain it almost to [the] breaking point.” Such dire prognostications aside, British officials rightly identified the general U.S. trend towards some disengagement.  

The July 1969 Guam or Nixon Doctrine seemingly applied Vietnamization to the whole of Asia, heightening uncertainty there. After speaking with Southeast Asian ambassadors in late 1969, an Australian diplomat gathered that they thought “we should accept U.S. disengagement as a political fact even now” and that “the Asian and Pacific countries were going to have to look after themselves.” While Canberra could hope that the Nixon Doctrine was a politically palatable “way to maintain U.S. involvement in Asia,”

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they worried domestic forces might one day force a withdrawal from Vietnam and Asia. Historian Roberto Rabel noted similar nervousness in New Zealand. According to Rabel, New Zealand’s government feared American “disillusionment about Vietnam might prompt broader American disengagement from Southeast Asia and thereby throw New Zealand’s forward defence strategy into disarray.” In January 1970, Nixon sent Vice President Agnew to reassure allies that America would “continue to meet our commitments, provide an umbrella against major attack by a nuclear power, and contribute both to economic development and to Asian countries’ programs to assure their own security.” But as Asian and Western observers realized, the whole credibility of the Nixon Doctrine rested on a favorable outcome in Vietnam. Should Nixon suffer a humiliating defeat there, all bets were off.

Great Britain and other European nations similarly dreaded a “Europeanization” of Western defense. These concerns predated the Nixon administration, but Vietnam withdrawals and the Nixon Doctrine of regional self-help and defense in Asia fueled these suspicions. Assuming a darker side of Nixon’s linkage, Europeans worried the president might make critical concessions on European security to gain Soviet help in ending the Vietnam War. Moreover, as foreign policy expert Lawrence Kaplan wrote, “If ‘Vietnamization’ of the hot war in Asia was a euphemism for the abandonment of an Asian

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ally, then a unilateral approach to the Warsaw bloc might lead to the ‘Europeanization’ of NATO’s defense in the Cold War.” Most European leaders believed Kissinger and Nixon understood that a unilateral reduction of U.S. forces in Europe would erode allied faith in American credibility and reduce their bargaining power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. But Congress threatened to force these reductions. Senator Mike Mansfield’s resolution to curtail the NATO commitment was no longer rhetorical; he and other senators intended to reduce the U.S. military presence in Europe. Indeed, even Pompidou became obsessed with the fear that the United States was leaving Europe. As Kissinger later noted, it was not America’s capability of defending Europe that was in question but the nation’s political will to do so.  

Making matters worse, throughout the 1960s, Soviet capabilities had continued to increase so that by the early 1970s, the Warsaw Pact had reached military parity if not superiority vis-à-vis NATO. The British feared this unprecedented strength coupled with U.S. domestic demands for global reductions would undermine NATO’s deterrent credibility. A score of British memos painted a dark picture, predicting unilateral withdrawals would cripple negotiations with the Soviets and increase the chances of a nuclear war. As in Vietnam, foreign observers interpreted the possible NATO reductions as a conflict between domestic and diplomatic needs. In reference to any U.S. reduction in the context of the SALT and balanced force reduction negotiations, German officials...
argued, “Only the foolish farmer would burn down his farm just before harvest time.” They added, “There is at present no feasible substitute for American troops” as they represented the deterrent credibility of the U.S. commitment. Or as Kissinger wrote Nixon in late 1969, “We must be able to project a credible power abroad in a situation where general nuclear war is no longer a likely or reasonable alternative. The general purpose forces are the way we are seen by allies—they are the contact and the reality.” Even at the dawn of détente, a large U.S. presence in Western Europe had its strategic, diplomatic, and psychological advantages.\(^{703}\)

Already Congress was demanding NATO cuts, and though Laird and Nixon argued they could withstand this pressure through mid-1971, European leaders believed a reduction was “probably inevitable in the long run.” Nixon and other U.S. policymakers recognized American interest lay in a continuing NATO contribution, but as Freeman cabled, “The current political trend in this country is in the direction of a reduction of U.S. commitments abroad and of the withdrawal of American troops from Europe.” British analysts believed there were now sufficient numbers in Congress to overrule the president on this issue. Whitehall viewed senators like Mike Mansfield as politicians not interested in facts but instead posturing and using mistaken details to play on public opinion and

pressure the White House “to move faster and farther” on reductions. Unlike Western defense officials, these senators minimized the Soviet threat and trusted the Soviets would withdraw some troops if the United States did the same. Moreover, they held that the less costly tripwire strategy of European defense would suffice. Ambassador John Freeman noted, “Congressional opinion is based on a mixture of fact and prejudice” and would become “more defiantly isolationist…if things went badly in Cambodia and Vietnam.”

Indeed, the general fear was that defeat in Vietnam would catalyze isolationism and provide “evidence of American unreliability.” As British Permanent Under-Secretary of State Denis Greenhill reasoned, “An American scuttle from Vietnam would herald a period of American isolationism” sure to force NATO reductions. Regardless, Freeman observed, “The Vietnamisation policy and the Guam Doctrine have already led to some demands that the defence of Europe should be ‘Europeanized’.” Freeman trusted cuts on the order of 25,000-50,000 soldiers along with increased European financial support might satisfy the Senate but he could not predict what would happen if America lost the Vietnam War.

As another British official noted, preventing reductions depended on American leaders’ ability “to hold their internal situation for a greater period of time.” Defeat in Indochina

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705 The United States had approximately 175,000 soldiers in Europe at this time. See Trauschweizer, *The Cold War U.S. Army*, 241-242.
might well make this task impossible by setting off a firestorm of public controversy, blame, and scrutiny of all U.S. commitments.\textsuperscript{706}

Thus, Britons sought to encourage Americans to hold the line in South Vietnam. Across the ocean, the White House desired some symbol or token of U.K. solidarity with the president, and both parties believed that a gesture of British support would help American opinion endure for the “long haul.” As one British diplomat noted, “The Administration seems to think it might be of real help domestically…if they could say that U.S. policy had the approval of such objective, experienced and sagacious people as the British.” Whitehall concurred, “By endorsing President Nixon’s position, therefore, we increase the chances that he may succeed in keeping the necessary backing to carry out his declared policy.”\textsuperscript{707}

After Nixon’s November 3 address, Her Majesty’s Government launched a public campaign defending America’s Vietnam policies. They believed that Nixon had vetoed escalation and that his sound Vietnamization policies deserved their support. U.S. objectives appeared in line with Britain’s, namely mutual withdrawal and South Vietnamese self-determination or at least a phased American de-escalation that left South Vietnam intact. Before the BBC, Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart defended the British government’s stance on Vietnam as “a humane and sensible position.” Stewart argued, “At present the American Government appears to us—and I think will appear to any fair-


minded person—to have gone further toward the basis of a fair settlement than Hanoi has done, and I wish Hanoi would catch them up.” Prime Minister Harold Wilson also defended America’s Vietnam War in the House of Commons, charging that the Communists were the primary aggressors and that they had committed far worse atrocities than the American massacre of South Vietnamese at My Lai. The South Vietnamese had the right of self-determination, which the international community should support. Wilson also applauded Nixon’s public speeches and Vietnamization before foreign dignitaries while casting doubt on Hanoi’s sincerity. Nevertheless, as Kissinger noted, “The British line is not in fact one of unqualified support—its whole stress is on our intent to withdraw.”

Her Majesty’s Government could not and would not back the resumed bombing of North Vietnam. In hindsight it seems clear that had Nixon gone through with Duck Hook, especially in the context of the November revelations regarding the My Lai massacre, British officials would have condemned his action. Before news of the massacre came out, the United Kingdom had faced continuing antiwar protests and “great pressure to denounce United States action.” Public knowledge of the My Lai massacre incensed many more Britons. Yet, Wilson remained firm in standing by U.S. policy despite the great political risk. Vietnamization was a testament to Nixon’s sincere desire to end the war honorably and a political expedient that allowed Wilson to back the president publicly. Ambassador

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Freeman rightly concluded that Vietnamization was “the only tolerable way out of an extremely embarrassing political impasse” for British ministers and he urged them to support this policy but perhaps at a “low profile.” By standing behind President Nixon and Vietnamization, Wilson and his government hoped to improve Anglo-American relations while encouraging Americans to hang on in Vietnam. They believed their security as well as the world’s depended upon it.\(^7^{09}\)

Other European nations remained dubious that their security hinged upon South Vietnam’s survival, but Western leaders looked upon the American alliance with uncertainty. They feared Nixon might make unwarranted concessions to enlist Soviet help in ending the Vietnam War or that the president or Congress would apply the principle of self-defense that undergirded Vietnamization and the Nixon Doctrine to Europe. NATO’s European members anticipated U.S. reductions there. Whereas Britain believed success in Vietnam would staunch this pressure, others like West Germany trusted Nixon would maintain American credibility and that withdrawals and retrenchment in Asia would better his chances of maintaining adequate troop strength in Europe. Nevertheless, the difference between retrenchment and abandonment could be slight, and the probability of American reductions encouraged European cooperation on regional defense. Kaplan noted, “If partial disengagement from one part of the world was a reaction not only to failure in Vietnam but

a concession to domestic opposition to costs in Europe as well as in Asia, the administration would have to walk a fine line to maintain its credibility with the allies.”

To the extent that there was a European consensus on Vietnam and Vietnamization in early 1970, it was that Nixon’s policies were making the best of a difficult situation but were also a recipe for an endless war in Indochina. Whitehall briefed Wilson that without a settlement, “The Americans would have effectively disengaged but there would be no peace in Vietnam.” The French agreed that in the absence of a breakthrough in Paris, a low-level war could continue indefinitely. Nixon privately admitted as much to these allies. President Nixon “observed that South Vietnam was now much stronger economically than North Vietnam and could probably sustain a war effort for a long time. Indeed, a state of civil war might endure for as much as another 25 years.” To try and preserve American honor, the war would continue in Vietnam, simply without U.S. soldiers.

Vietnamization, 1970-1975

Vietnamization proved incapable of ending the Vietnam War. Certainly, it improved Nixon’s political position and calmed domestic tensions. In 1969, Vietnamization also appeared a sound strategy for ending American fighting while

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711 Briefs for Visit of Prime Minister Wilson from UK to USA in January 1970, January 1970, FCO 7/1819, PRO; record of a conversation between the Secretary-General at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sir Stanley Tomlinson, 10/23/1970, FCO 15/1115, PRO; and records of discussion between PM Heath and RN at Camp David, 12/18/1970, FCO 15/1118, PRO.
establishing a firm basis for South Vietnamese survival. Domestic and international observers understood that Nixon was not getting out of Vietnam but staying in to preserve the Republic of Vietnam as well as U.S. credibility. They believed Vietnamization could accomplish these aims, but matters of personal and national credibility remained contingent on an acceptable, durable outcome in Indochina. Vietnamization was a step in this direction but only that. A long and dangerous road lay ahead.

Along that path lay the perennial temptation to escalate the war. Kissinger and Nixon always considered and at times chose to escalate the war radically, but there was a key difference from what they had planned in 1969. Thereafter, escalation was primarily a means to protect or promote Laird’s Vietnamization strategy. As Nixon explained to his aides during the 1970 U.S.-South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia, “It will shorten the war and allow the Vietnamization program to continue on schedule.”712 The allied operations in Cambodia, the intense ground and air war in Laos, as well as the air campaigns, Linebacker I and II, against North Vietnam were attempts to solidify the military and political gains in South Vietnam while also convincing Thieu that Nixon was not abandoning his country.

Yet, Laird’s domestic warnings proved prescient; even tactical escalation came with a political cost. The April 1970 Cambodian incursion ruined Nixon’s image of careful moderation and incited the protests that led to student deaths at Kent State. It also gave Congress further cause to attack defense spending and Vietnam appropriations. Although congressional doves lacked the numbers to affect White House policies, Vietnamization

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712 Safire, Before the Fall, 189.
was a “long haul” strategy that would need significant aid and lasting U.S. political support to work. Every escalation eroded this essential domestic base in Congress.\footnote{Safire, \textit{Before the Fall}, 180; Franz Schurmann, \textit{The Foreign Politics of Richard Nixon: The Grand Design} (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), 97, 134; Johns, \textit{Vietnam’s Second Front}, 282, 285.}


But Nixon had continued to lose ground in Congress. The unprecedented Christmas bombing campaign, Linebacker II, galvanized Senate doves. A poll of the available senators taken on December 21, 1972 revealed that only 19 of the 73 favored the bombing and 45 of them advocated legislation to end America’s role in defending South Vietnam.\footnote{Bundy, \textit{A Tangled Web}, 362.} Linebacker II brought all sides back to the diplomatic table in Paris, resulting in the Paris Peace Accords. Yet, Nixon, Thieu, and Le Duan knew the war would go on. South Vietnam would need constant military and economic aid if it was to survive, and this funding required congressional cooperation. Catalyzed by the emerging Watergate scandal, Congress began restricting and curtailing the already limited support given to America’s Southeast Asian allies.\footnote{Johns, \textit{Vietnam’s Second Front}, 286-294, 311-321; and Mann, \textit{Grand Delusion}, 711-712, 716-718.}

American political problems and divisions represented only part of the problem as the South Vietnamese failed to build on 1969’s successes and as the North Vietnamese
remained determined to unify Vietnam by force. Thieu was unwilling or unable to deal with the systemic corruption in South Vietnamese society and military. Poor leadership plagued the army as a whole. Nevertheless, the loss of critical American aid as well as logistical and military support crippled ARVN operations. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union and China continued to pour aid and military supplies into North Vietnam with the latter sending more aid in 1971-1972 than it had in the last twenty years combined.\textsuperscript{717} Hanoi bided its time and marshaled its forces, expanding its control of Indochina and finally launching another major offensive against South Vietnam in March 1975. On April 30, the Republic of Vietnam ceased to exist.\textsuperscript{718}

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\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{717} Danhui, “The Sino-Soviet Dispute,” 304-305; and Shen Zhihua, “Sino-U.S. Reconciliation and China’s Vietnam Policy,” in Roberts, Behind the Bamboo Curtain, 355. \\
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Conclusion

Surveying Vietnamization’s origins and immediate reactions, several major themes stand out. First, the U.S. domestic context mattered. The perceived direction of congressional and popular opinion as well as social unrest swayed American policymakers and frightened foreign officials. They exaggerated the state of the U.S. home front, but historically, perception has often been as powerful as reality. Nevertheless, domestic and international observers agreed that Vietnamization was the only tenable path.

Second, despite this conclusion, escalation always competed with de-escalation and de-Americanization. After the 1968 Tet offensive, President Lyndon Johnson reluctantly agreed to halt attacks against North Vietnam and pursue negotiations, but this decision remained contingent on progress in Paris. As the year progressed, LBJ grew ever more frustrated, frequently reconsidering the bombing halt and contemplating renewed or expanded violence against the North. De-Americanization was anathema. So too, President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger devised and nearly implemented a devastating attack against Hanoi in 1969.

Third, Nixon’s first secretary of defense, Melvin Laird, was decisive in preventing this escalation and breaking the bureaucratic stalemate between hawks and doves. Laird was no dove but in 1968, he had concluded that Congress and American society could not tolerate an endless American ground war in Indochina, much less renewed aerial violence against North Vietnam. Laird was Vietnamization’s chief architect and advocate. His persistence and faith in the strategy as well as his outright cunning got the program approved whereas Kissinger’s planning for a strategy of dramatic escalation came to naught in 1969. Laird skillfully used the Pentagon bureaucracy both to spy on Nixon’s and
Kissinger’s secret efforts to end the war by force and to make sure Vietnamization grew to maturation regardless of the president’s wishes. As negotiations failed and the administration ruled out escalation, policymakers continued removing U.S. forces according to Laird’s plan for Vietnamization. In short, Laird set the course for America’s departure from the ground war in South Vietnam.

Fourth, the theme of “time” ran throughout official discussions in 1968 and 1969. After Tet, the domestic context did not afford U.S. policymakers the time to pursue a strict military victory in Vietnam. For doves like Clark Clifford, this lack of time meant America had to negotiate with Hanoi for the best possible terms and get out as quickly as possible. Laird, Nixon, Thieu, and others hoped American troop reductions would buy the time necessary to build up South Vietnamese defenses and political institutions so that they could continue the war without U.S. soldiers. Kissinger doubted the public would ever afford the White House this much time. Only a decisively savage military blow against North Vietnam would compel Hanoi to settle, and Nixon would have to act before the climate of opinion made such an operation untenable. Nixon reluctantly decided that Laird’s interpretation was correct, ruling out escalation for the moment. By the end of 1969, the White House along with international observers concluded that the Nixon administration had indeed bought time with troop withdrawals.

Fifth, after Tet, there was growing optimism that a noncommunist South Vietnam could survive without the large presence of American soldiers. Citing pacification, military, and political gains, a whole host of diplomats and officials recorded their “cautious optimism” in late 1969 and early 1970. They judged that if Nixon carried it out
prudently, Vietnamization could work, saving both the Republic of Vietnam and the American home front.

Finally, despite this nascent optimism, the war was not yet over. Vietnamization signaled the end of America’s Vietnam War. The fighting and dying would continue, and though American combat forces would figure less and less into the conflict, outside observers still judged U.S. credibility by the manner of its exit from Vietnam.

As three unwavering anticommunists involved in Republican politics, Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Melvin Laird each advocated American intervention in Indochina and exploited Vietnam politics to advance their careers. Extrapolating what they believed to be the Korean War’s political and diplomatic lessons, Nixon and Laird abhorred the idea of U.S. troop commitments to South Vietnam. Instead, the United States should use the threat of strategic bombing and mining campaigns to deter Communist aggression. Ground forces would only play to the enemy’s strengths and risk another land war in Asia. All three committed themselves to defending the Republic of Vietnam, though, and so backed President Johnson’s Americanization of the conflict in 1965. The deployment of hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers did little to stabilize South Vietnam, and the war’s escalation exacerbated social tensions at home. Moving with the political wind, Nixon and Kissinger independently dropped their hawkish rhetoric in 1967, though their policies continued to emphasize dramatic shows of force against North Vietnam. Laird increasingly doubted most Americans would tolerate this violence. 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 hypocritical. This development had much to do with Laird’s longstanding aversion to American troop deployments in Third World conflicts 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 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. Clifford and other administration officials convinced President Johnson that the United States had little choice but to cap the war’s hostilities in the South and stop bombing the North. Johnson grudgingly agreed to these moves in order to advance negotiations, but as progress proved elusive in Paris, LBJ retained punitive bombing and escalation as an option. In the closing days of the Johnson administration, the president would consider resumed bombing but never de-Americanization, not even a token withdrawal to improve his historical legacy. He hoped that his successor could secure victory where he could not.

Nevertheless, President Johnson’s tentative de-escalation and the domestic factors behind this decision disheartened America’s allies and emboldened Hanoi. Thieu responded to U.S. uncertainty by proposing de-Americanization in 1968 as a means to prolong American goodwill and support. The North Vietnamese assessed America’s
internal situation and launched successive offensives to achieve a decisive military victory even as they used the promise of productive talks to induce an unconditional bombing halt. Australia and Great Britain predicted growing isolationism and a general American retreat from its global commitments. De-Americanization would be a global phenomenon, and U.S. allies would have to assume the burden of their own defense. With the specter of global de-Americanization lurking in the background, international actors planned accordingly.

Meanwhile, Nixon had campaigned and won on a ticket of de-Americanization, but he refused to bind himself to that policy. Under Laird’s, Nixon’s, and Kissinger’s guidance, the Republican Party evaluated the domestic context and formulated their party’s Vietnam platform and presidential election strategy around de-Americanization. The result was a promise of gradual de-escalation: the withdrawal of U.S. soldiers as the South Vietnamese improved their military capacity. Once in the White House, Nixon pursued both escalation and de-Americanization. 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 peripheral to Nixon and Kissinger’s coercive diplomacy. Nixon authorized an intensification of the South Vietnamese ground war, greatly increased the clandestine bombing of North Vietnamese enclaves and supply routes in Cambodia and Laos, and threatened further escalation to foreign officials. If it was to become Nixon’s Vietnam War, he wanted Communists to know how savage it would become.

As Kissinger and Nixon pursued escalation, Laird developed Vietnamization, creating a strategy that would continue to remove U.S. forces even if negotiations broke
down. 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 the nation’s conduct of the war. Laird’s sixteen years as a member of Congress 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 ticking time bomb of domestic opinion before it exploded into something worse than the social chaos that defined 1968. Moreover, Laird worried unless Nixon changed Vietnam strategy, Congress would begin to curtail war and defense appropriations. Vietnamization was his tool of choice to curb unrest and bolster Nixon’s political fortunes without abandoning South Vietnam. Hence, Laird moved quickly on Vietnam policy and by the end of March, he had won presidential approval for continued work on Vietnamization as well as a token withdrawal of troops later that year. Nixon’s 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 tentative success at making Vietnamization administration policy.

The second half of 1969 saw a resurgent Kissinger try to derail Vietnamization, an objective he failed to achieve. Seeing a lack of progress at the Paris peace talks, Kissinger feared that continued Vietnamization would compromise his chances of securing a

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719 Interview of Laird by Maurice Matloff and Alfred Goldberg, 9/2/1986, folder “Laird-Oral History Interviews (1),” Box D8, LP, GFL.
settlement beneficial to America’s interest, namely one that called for the mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese and U.S. forces from South Vietnam. Kissinger persuaded 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.

By September, the resulting rift within the Nixon administration over Vietnam strategy threatened to kill Vietnamization. Already Nixon and Kissinger had delivered the ultimatum and postponed the second reduction announcement, which was to have occurred in August. With Nixon’s approval, Kissinger and his staff criticized Vietnamization, revised contingency plans, and laid the groundwork for a presidential address announcing the escalation. Arguing that the “salted peanuts” of troop withdrawals would never satisfy the public or Congress, Kissinger was adamant that this was the time to strike North Vietnam, securing peace before the home front collapsed. Conversely, Laird’s memos argued that without these withdrawals public and congressional opinion would soon demand an immediate end to the war. But his Vietnamization was a tentative and fragile alternative to Kissinger’s escalatory strategy. Its uncertainty reflected Nixon’s own indecision as he struggled to choose between the pragmatic politician’s instinct to relieve domestic tensions and the Cold Warrior’s hunger for a clear victory over Communism in Vietnam.
Ultimately, Laird’s domestic arguments and faith in Vietnamization won out as events tipped the balance in Laird’s favor. In late September, Congress stepped up its scrutiny of international commitments and the Vietnam War, and in early October, violent protests occurred in Chicago. With the October Moratorium on the horizon, Nixon concluded 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.

Rather than calling Americans to rally around Duck Hook, Nixon’s November 3 speech beckoned the “great silent majority” to stand behind Vietnamization. And it unexpectedly worked. Polling data, political pundits, U.S. officials, and international observers concluded that after the speech, Nixon’s popularity along with public support for Vietnamization dramatically surged. Historian Fredrik Logevall has described a “permissive context” that allowed LBJ to Americanize the war. Perhaps in late 1969, one could describe the silent majority as “permissive once more.” Even in spite of Nixon’s sporadic escalation of the war, Nixon maintained popular support for his Vietnam policies until the Watergate scandal destroyed his presidency.

Vietnamization bought the Nixon administration and South Vietnam time to continue the war and build up ARVN forces but it could not end the war with North Vietnam. Nixon and Kissinger hoped for a break in negotiations but they resigned themselves to the fact that Laird’s Vietnamization was “irreversible.” 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.
Yet, in late 1969 and early 1970, international officials judged Vietnamization a political and military success. Nixon’s conservative reductions had not jeopardized the pacification gains in the countryside or the overall war effort. The Republic of Vietnam appeared stronger than ever. Nixon’s strong base of domestic support was every bit as important. U.S. allies believed that with this public standing, President Nixon could fend off isolationism and preserve U.S. commitments and credibility worldwide. But everything hinged on South Vietnam’s survival as officials argued an American defeat or humiliation would bolster the isolationists and augur a global U.S. retreat. Given these stakes and Hanoi’s resolve, Vietnamization proved incapable of allaying foreign fears.

The Inter-Mestic Context & Contingency

Only the domestic context can explain Vietnamization’s origins. President Lyndon Johnson was a recalcitrant Vietnam hawk but he was also a skilled politician. He wanted desperately to win the war in Indochina but, after the 1968 Tet offensive, understood that he could no longer carry the public with him. He established a manpower ceiling in South Vietnam, adopted an unconditional bombing halt, and began negotiations in Paris. As the historical record makes clear, LBJ would have punished North Vietnamese intransigence had it not been for his domestic concerns. The will to win remained strong, though and he refused to begin de-Americanization.

For Nixon, Kissinger, and Laird, “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 1969.720 Nixon thought that if his 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 events that fall only reinforced Nixon’s fear that the fragile domestic situation would not tolerate Duck Hook. Indeed, had Nixon believed a strong base of public support existed, he would have implemented 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. Finally, Laird held that 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 opinion and unrest as ticking time bombs 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. Nixon did not enter the White House in 1969 with a secret plan to end the
war, and instead, his advisors 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 also tailored 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 became more malleable. In a similar fashion, Laird gradually moved away from military plans that maintained a 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 early 1960s 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. He carried out secret negotiations and 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.

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721 Interview of Melvin R. Laird by Matloff and Goldberg.
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, “[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.\footnote{Telcon, RN and HAK, 11:33 p.m., 11/3/1969, HAK Telcons 3:1, RNPLM.}

Laird continued to expedite Vietnamization, though. He often used his power as secretary of defense to begin withdrawing troops and would then present the withdrawal to Nixon as a \textit{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!’”\footnote{Haig, \textit{Inner Circles}, 308.} Still, Laird always secured presidential approval for these redeployments.\footnote{Laird, interview with author, November 24, 2007.}

There were several reasons why Laird was able to continue getting authorization for troop withdrawals even when Nixon thought 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 incite a public backlash against Nixon.
Additionally, 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

725 Haig, Inner Circles, 227.
became everything.\textsuperscript{726} 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 truth in the December 1969 *Detroit Free Press* article that called Laird “the second most powerful man in Washington.”\textsuperscript{727} 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, Laird turned Vietnamization into a 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.

Judged by the nascent optimism that accompanied Vietnamization in late 1969, Laird’s strategy appeared to be working at home and in South Vietnam. Whereas President Johnson’s de-escalation had unnerved allies in 1968, President Nixon clarified that America was staying in Vietnamese and world affairs. His public resolve, personal diplomacy, and prudent reductions made clear to the South Vietnamese that he was not abandoning their country. Nixon’s popularity, in part derived from the popularity of his policies (especially Vietnamization), indicated that the president could handle foreign and domestic problems. American allies were guardedly optimistic about the future, and many increasingly banked on South Vietnam’s survival. But Vietnamization was also a

\textsuperscript{726} Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, note 13 of photos.
testament to domestic fragility. After the Tet Offensive, the U.S. public no longer appeared capable of sustaining a protracted war. Nixon succeeded in marshaling the masses, but world leaders recognized this popularity was tenuous at best. Vietnamization was not a program for precipitate withdrawal but it could become one if the domestic mood shifted. Sensing this internal fragility, allied leaders from Saigon to London made a concerted effort to encourage Americans to stay the course. As they understood, Nixon and Laird had made the war’s domestic costs manageable but they had failed to end the war itself. America’s Vietnam War would end but the fighting would go on.
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