

5-2014

The Politics of Peace for Vietnam: The Paris Peace Conference 1972/1973

Jonathan Lumpkin
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uno.edu/honors_theses



Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lumpkin, Jonathan, "The Politics of Peace for Vietnam: The Paris Peace Conference 1972/1973" (2014). *Senior Honors Theses*. Paper 56.

This Honors Thesis-Unrestricted is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Showcase at ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Politics of Peace for Vietnam: The Paris Peace Conference 1972/1973

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of History
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts, With University Honors

And Honors in History

by

Jonathan Lumpkin

May 2014

Table of Contents

Abstract	Page iii
Abbreviations	Page iv
I – Introduction	Pages 1 - 2
II – Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, Détente, and Vietnam	Pages 2 - 10
III – Richard Nixon’s Geopolitics and Way of War 1969 - 1972	Pages 10 - 17
IV – The War for Peace 1972/1973	Pages 17 - 33
V – Conclusion: All Politics is Local	Pages 33 - 34
Bibliography	Pages 35 - 36

Abstract

The 1972 Paris Peace Talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho brought the American involvement in the Vietnam War to a close by early 1973. The main sticking points theretofore were stipulations in draft cease-fire agreements allowing Northern troops to remain in the South and the National Liberation Front's participation in South Vietnam's government. President of South Vietnam Nguyen Van Thieu adamantly opposed both proposed stipulations lest his power be diluted. Thus, Kissinger had to broker a diplomatic agreement between Thieu and Le Duc Tho which was acceptable to US foreign policy viz. "peace with honor."

Keywords: Kissinger, Vietnam, peace, Paris, diplomacy, Nixon, Le Duc Tho, 1972, 1973.

Abbreviations

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnamese Army)
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)
GVN	Government of Vietnam (Saigon Government)
NCNRC	Council of National Reconciliation and Concord
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam (Northern Army)
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (Political arm of the Viet Cong)
SAC	Strategic Air Command

“In the crucible of Vietnam, American exceptionalism turned on itself.”
– Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 1994.

I – Introduction

The structures of power changed as influence and control shaped the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Essential to the process were the personalities of Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon. They crafted a geopolitical system designed to position the United States at the fulcrum of power. The United States had to reimagine the mechanisms of its power from hard to soft, from direct to indirect, and from unilateral to multilateral. I will demonstrate how détente conceived within this new configuration of US strategy delivered an end to the American involvement in Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh is an apt synecdoche for Vietnam. He began as a nationalist and anti-colonialist and only turned towards Leninism when he was snubbed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The conflict in Indochina represented Vietnamese will for national liberation and independence under the auspices of Communism. Any understanding of a problem gestures towards a solution. The American Cold War ideology framed the Vietnam question as a proving ground for Western ideologies.¹ The problem was the expansion of global communism in Asia and not a movement for national liberation. This bipolar construction misconstrued the stakes attached to Vietnam and the American commitment therein.² Vietnam was at the crossroads of east-west and north-south relations.

Vietnam had always been a political problem rather than a strategic one for American leaders. Vietnam first came into view in American politics during the construction of post World

¹ Fredrik Logevall, “The Indochina wars and the Cold War, 1945-1975”, in: Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of The Cold War*, Vol. II: *Crises and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 282-283.

² Robert Buzzanco, “International Capitalism and Communism Collide with Vietnamese Nationalism”, in: Dennis Merrill and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, Vol. II: *Since 1914. Documents and Essays* (7th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2010) p. 422.

War II security alliances. The French under Charles de Gaulle and Britain wished to reassert their overseas empires in the aftermath of the defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. President Henry Truman acquiesced to French colonial demands to ensure moderates (non-Soviet backed communists) would remain in power in Paris. Furthermore, the expansion of communism into Indochina could threaten the post-war recovery of U.S. allies in Asia.³

Vietnam would not have been a significant factor to the new stable world system, if so much had not been committed there. Saigon was no Berlin until the United States made it the test case for American geopolitics and capitalism in the Global South. Vietnam continued to pose political questions but never constituted such a threat to the West that the expenditure of blood and treasure there was justified. Thus, how the American involvement in Vietnam came to a close was subsumed within the larger quest for political stability and a reaffirmation of the structure of world power.

II - Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, Détente, and Vietnam

President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger entered the White House in January 1969 with the goal to create a more stable world system. This goal is on its face trivial; after all everyone seeks global stability. However, the terms and conditions for a world system to be “stable” are disputed. Kissinger’s understanding of global security echoed Willy Brandt’s *Neue Ostpolitik* which called for rapprochement with East Germany. The American turn towards accepting the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence was not unique nor the first, but quite significant because of the immense political power of the United States.

³ Logevall, “The Indochina wars”, pp. 282-283.

Kissinger was a proponent of restoring the European tradition of balance of power relations (Realpolitik).⁴ He saw more opportunities for cooperation through easing of tensions with America's geopolitical rivals. Kissinger imagined a return to the dispassionate balance of power exemplified by the division of post-Napoleonic Europe at the Congress of Vienna.⁵ Any political order must recognize the existing concentrations of power in order to be stable. For Kissinger this standard meant recognition of the Communist government in mainland China, détente with the Soviet Union, and implementation of the Nixon Doctrine.⁶

Kissinger's was born in Germany during the Weimar Republic. He fled Nazi Germany in 1938 to the United States as an immigrant refugee. After serving in Army Intelligence during the end of War World II, Kissinger wrote his dissertation on Klemens von Metternich and the effort to craft stability after the Napoleonic wars.⁷ Kissinger served as National Security Adviser to both Presidents Nixon and Ford⁸ as well as an advisor to other Presidents.

As an academic Kissinger discouraged ideological thinking in foreign policy; rational and dispassionate bargaining, respecting existing power concentrations, were fundamentally better. It has been conjectured by Walter Isaacson that Kissinger's distaste for ideology come from is persecution as a boy in Nazi Germany. He experienced firsthand the lunatic ideology would drive people to commit terrible crimes. This background, atypical for an American politician, gave him a unique perspective on events:

“Unlike my contemporaries,’ [Kissinger] later said, ‘I had experienced the fragility of the fabric of modern society.’ He would tell his young, dovish staffers, ‘We are saving you from the

⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 621.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 711.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 711-732.

⁷ Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

⁸ Kissinger jointly held the position of National Security Advisor and Secretary of State until President Ford split the positions at the behest of Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Chaney during the so-called Halloween Massacre in 1975.

Right.’ When Kissinger tried that line on Tony Lake after the Cambodian invasion, Lake replied, ‘You *are* the Right.’”⁹

At times he seemed undemocratic, deriding the input of the people, but these traits were more a reaction against the populism he experienced in his youth.¹⁰ When so many people can be so wrong, it undermines faith in democracy. The will of the people is not always a path towards the best policy. In a sense, Kissinger practices a trustee style of representativeness. Namely he pursued a policy he believed to be in the best interest of the American people despite the fact that they may be opposed to it. This characterization of Kissinger is an overly idealistic interpretation of his actions, of course he often pursued his self-interested goals, but it illustrates his intellectual framework of policy within a democracy – do what’s right in terms of national interest despite it being unpopular.

Kissinger’s academic background led him to overemphasize theory in evaluating foreign policy in general and linkages in particular. The theoretical basis for linkage was predicated on a dubious assumption that world events had a greater causal link than they may have in reality. Kissinger sought to link the SALT arms negotiations with the Soviet Union with their policy towards Hanoi. Here the dubious assumption was that Moscow had a level of influence with Hanoi such that they could leverage their influence towards more concessions at the negotiating table. However, Moscow’s relationship with Hanoi was more similar to the US’ relationship with Saigon; Moscow had real influence within the Warsaw Pact unlike their leverage with North Vietnam.

A starker example of the failure of linkage in its practical application is the US response to North Korea’s downing of the EC121 spy plane over international waters. After much oscillation between potential responses, to what appeared as a provocation from Pyongyang, the

⁹ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 279.

¹⁰ Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 7.

Nixon Administration decided to respond by striking North Vietnam with B-52's. In this case, the dubious assumption was that North Korea cared about bombing in North Vietnam. More important to the strategy of linkage was that Pyongyang might even discern that bombing was directed towards them.

In other cases, there was a sufficient nexus of relations between two factors in a linkage. In such a case policy goals sought after were achieved. The Christmas Bombings in December 1972 of North Vietnam ostensibly directed at Hanoi was truly a tactical operation towards Thieu demonstrating American support of Saigon. When such a sufficient nexus was absent, linkage meant little more than wishful thinking. After so many policies towards Vietnam failed, the potential option of using the Soviet Union toward a negotiated settlement was appealing and merited exploration.

Theoretically linkage asserted, quite rightly, that regional events (necessarily) occurred in a larger geopolitical context. However, the assumption of a sufficient nexus between geopolitical factors was often a dubious one when linkage was applied. Linkage, as a foreign policy making strategy, is sound. In this sense, "linkage" is the American formulation for quid pro quo, though perhaps on a larger scale. As such the strategy of linkage was an integral component of triangular diplomacy which by its very nature sought to link various foreign policy issues into a structure of peace.

The Realpolitik thinking in Kissinger's dissertation characterized his political thought throughout his life and is consistent with his actions in office.¹¹ In his meeting with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, Kissinger explained the difference between the ideological outlook taken by John Foster Dulles in 1954 and the Nixon administration. "We do not deal with communism in

¹¹ Harvey Starr, "The Kissinger Years: Studying Individuals and Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1980): 493.

the abstract, but with specific communist states on the basis of their specific action toward us, and not as an abstract crusade.”¹² Kissinger was highly critical of any image of a crusading America fighting for democracy or freedom. On the folly of President Wilson Kissinger remarks,

“Yet the Wilsonian approach to foreign policy permitted no distinction to be made among the monsters to be slain. Universalist in its approach to world order, Wilsonianism did not lend itself to an analysis of relative importance of various countries. America was obliged to fight for what was right, regardless of local circumstances, and independent of geopolitics.”¹³

However, Kissinger does point out in his treatise *Diplomacy* that American geopolitical moves must be rationalized to the public on an ideological basis in order to gain their support.¹⁴

President Richard Nixon was an unusual character within American politics as well. The son of grocer from Southern California, Nixon disliked confrontation and people in general, not the ideal characteristics of a politician. His personality combined with his political failures in 1960 and 1962 created a mistrust of the people within his mind similar to that in Kissinger’s. Both men saw the public as unthinking masses not fit for understanding high policy. Their superficial differences gave way to like minded thinking.

“Both of [Nixon and Kissinger] could be suspicious and secretive; they tended to think the worst of other people’s motives, and they liked to pit their perceived enemies against one another. Inveterate backbiters, they forged alliances by invoking mutual enemies and brooding about shared antagonisms.”¹⁵

The confluence of the two outsiders Nixon and Kissinger and their mistrust for the people created an atmosphere in the White House, where if a policy would encounter public opposition, then it better be kept out of the public sphere. Ironically, Kissinger stated in *A World Restored*,

¹² Geoffrey Warner, “Nixon, Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China, 1969-1972” *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2006): 769.

¹³ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 621.

¹⁴ Michael Howard, Review of *Diplomacy* by Henry Kissinger, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 3 (June 1994): 136.

¹⁵ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 139-140.

“The acid test of a policy is its ability to gain domestic support.” This secretive practice also stemmed from the public opposition which crippled Lyndon Johnson’s presidency. Nixon planned to avoid the failures of Johnson by openly pursuing politically popular policies in Vietnam, namely Vietnamization and the lottery system when it came to the draft, while pursuing unpopular policies in the shadows, namely the invasion and air campaign in Cambodia in 1970.

The two-pronged attack gave Nixon the immediate breathing space he needed to conduct his foreign policy but ultimately undermined it. Without any broad based public support for his policies, they only accomplished their goals as long as the President’s own political power lasted. Détente with the Soviet Union was undermined by the White House’s failure to communicate with the American public the benefit of cooperation. However, secrecy did not derail all of Nixon and Kissinger’s policies. In fact, it is the very secrecy, hidden from public scrutiny and free from political grandstanding, that allowed for the American involvement in Vietnam to come to an end.

The 1972 Paris Peace Talks between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho brought the American involvement in the Vietnam War to a close by early 1973. The secrecy in which it was conducted did not prevent political posturing on either side of the table. Furthermore, both sides conducted their negotiations with political ends in mind and not some idealistic notion of world peace and global stability. Secrecy, after all, did not solve all of the problems of the negotiating agenda.

The main sticking points were two stipulations in draft cease-fire agreements allowing Northern troops to remain in the South and the National Liberation Front's participation in South Vietnam's government. The President of The Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), Nguyen

Van Thieu, adamantly opposed the October 1972 Agreement between Kissinger and Tho lest his power be diluted. Thus, Kissinger had to broker a diplomatic agreement between Thieu and Le Duc Tho which was acceptable to US foreign policy namely the policy of “peace with honor.”

In reality these stipulations themselves were not the stumbling blocks to peace, but rather reflected political positions which were mutually exclusive. Saigon opposed a “cease-fire in place” because Thieu believed his political position was such that he did not need to accept it. Similarly, Hanoi was opposed to accepting any deal in Paris until after their Spring Offensive of 1971, which was neutralized by American air power. Only then did thinking in the Hanoi Politburo change and they accepted the possibility that victory might not be won on the battlefield, at least as long as the Americans were still in the country.

The political stances rather than the derivative demands made at the bargaining table are the important factors in an analysis of the end to the American involvement in Indochina. The nuts and bolts of the evolving negotiations in Paris are important to understand, but only as a reflection of political realities. For example, in 1968 when the North Vietnamese demanded a round negotiating table so that the National Liberation Front would appear equal and the South demanded a square negotiating table, this reflected the two sides’ intractable disagreements over the political future of the South and not a disagreement over interior design.

In the case of Washington, domestic politics played heavily into the thinking on Vietnam policy. Nixon’s principal concern in the second half of his first presidential term was his reelection in 1972. The Vietnam War had just destroyed the reelection prospects of his predecessor, President Lyndon Johnson. Nixon knew that he had to make significant progress on his 1968 campaign promise to withdraw the U.S. from Indochina.

A twist to Nixon's reelection plans was that the U.S. exit from Vietnam could not appear politically motivated. President Johnson's peace bid in late 1968 was framed as a hollow political maneuver to help the Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey. So the campaign promises could not be completed in a manner too politically convenient for Nixon. "[Albert Sindlinger and Burns Roper] had concluded to [Charles "Chuck"] Colson, 'that any agreement we reached before the election would appear to be a political ploy.'"¹⁶ Furthermore, Colson warned Nixon that many hawkish blue-collar Democrats would have no reason to support Nixon after a settlement.¹⁷ The loss of this demographic would diminish Nixon's landslide victory, a goal he went to incredible lengths to protect and enhance.

Kissinger on the other hand believed the American bargaining position was the strongest before the election. The North was worried that a reelected Nixon would have a mandate to strike the North hard. Kissinger believed this made them more willing to make concessions. What the North was not aware of, but Kissinger was, interpreted to be the fact that the returning Democratic Congress would halt appropriations for operations in Indochina.¹⁸ The American bargaining position could then only be diminished after the elections from Kissinger's perspective.

The different motives of Nixon and Kissinger placed them at odds with one another in October 1972. Both Nixon and Kissinger's ideal timetables for settlement did slightly overlap after the election and before the start of the new Congressional session in January. Peace was not at hand in October but was delayed until January of 1973.

¹⁶ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 441.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

¹⁸ This is to say nothing if Democratic Presidential Nominee George McGovern would have been elected – he would have slaughtered the cow when he would have gotten the milk for free. That is, he campaigned on the promise to withdraw from Vietnam the day he took the oath of office regardless of peace negotiations.

When Nixon did want his peace in mid-November 1972, Thieu refused to sign the October Agreement negotiating with Kissinger. Thieu's rejection following Kissinger's "peace is at hand speech" in late October turned the public fiercely against Nixon. It was as if he had lied to the American public, promising false hope for peace only to get reelected.

III – Richard Nixon's Geopolitics and Way of War 1969 - 1972

Kissinger criticized the Johnson administration's use of force policy in Vietnam for being too rationally incremental, i.e. lacking any sudden psychological impact that a major increase in force may have brought. Kissinger referred to the Johnson Administration's policy as the "McNamara syndrome."¹⁹ McNamara and Johnson had failed to make the DRV fear an imminent knockout punch. The absence of such a fear weakened the United States' bargaining position by showing the limits of what short-term future action may bring. General Westmoreland, deputy commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) is as much to blame as Robert McNamara. General Westmoreland repeatedly reported an imminent turning point just around the corner. He always needed a few more tens of thousands of troops in order to finish off the enemy.

A benefit of being out of power is the opportunity to indulge in the naïve fantasy that all the problems facing a nation could be solved if only one's own preferred policies were enacted. Nixon viewed the American shortcomings in Vietnam not as a structural feature of the conflict but symptomatic of the deficiencies of the Democrats' policy therein. Nixon sought to cure the "McNamara syndrome" by introducing what he would later term the "Mad Man Theory."

¹⁹ Jeffrey Kimball, ed., *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-era Strategy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), p. 18 [hereinafter cited as Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*].

Nixon's basic premise was to make credible the potential and unpredictable use of overwhelming U.S. force in order to strengthen the U.S. influence by way of threat. "Power thus depended more on perception – about a nation's will and the believability of its threats – than on military might."²⁰ Kissinger grew his influences with President Nixon by playing to his dark side. In staff meetings, Kissinger would advocate for a hawkish stance. He asserted that communists only respected strength and the President must act with overwhelming forces. This tactic played well and brought Kissinger closer to the President over the years.²¹

The consequence of encouraging Nixon's more sinister tendencies is that it drove the President and the White House to take more extreme measures of questionable legality. For example, during the *New York Times* publication of the Pentagon Papers, Kissinger pushed for a strong response against the leaker Daniel Ellsberg. He suggested that they attack him personally in an attempt to discredit him. The irony of all this is that the Pentagon Papers only implicated Kennedy and Johnson, i.e. the Democrats, for lying to the American people about Vietnam.

However, Kissinger believed that the publication of classified documents directly affected the office of the Presidency in the eyes of the Soviets, Chinese, and North Vietnamese. It made Nixon look weak that he could not control the executive branch from leaks. The evolution of the programs put in place to smear Ellsberg, with many more ethical mistakes made along the way, eventually led to the resignation of Nixon. Nixon's "Mad Man" was a dangerous tactic Kissinger indulged to bring himself closer to power. The consequences were unpredictable or at least too risky.

The United States' Strategic Air Command's (SAC) Operation Menu began on March 18, 1969, ostensibly with the objective of disrupting the People's Army of Vietnam's (PAVN)

²⁰ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 161.

²¹ Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 107.

operations in Laos and Cambodia. While the air offensive failed to accomplish its stated objective, Operation Menu proved Nixon's readiness to rapidly expand the US involvement during a time of de-Americanizing the war.

Nixon and Kissinger coupled their threats and acts of violence with *détente vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the PRC. The apparent incongruity both strengthened the irrationality necessary to Nixonian strategy and embodied the concept of “linkage.” Linkage was the combination of positive and negative incentives, the consistent idea at the center of *détente* and the Mad Man Theory. For example, Nixon promised Thieu continuing American support after US withdrawal from Vietnam, while simultaneously threatening that the US would simply walk away from South Vietnam, if Thieu did not sign the Paris Peace Accords. The combination of negative and positive incentives typifies Nixonian strategy consistently pursued by both the President and his National Security Council (NSC) Advisor and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

Their thinking led to an initial expansion of the Vietnam War under codename Operation Menu. Beginning on March 18, 1969, U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC) began an air campaign to disrupt the People’s Army of Vietnam’s (PAVN) operations in Laos and Cambodia. Enemy troop activity in South Vietnam was not greatly affected by Operation Menu nor did the later ground invasion of Cambodia uncover the elusive “Bamboo Pentagon.”²² The failure of Operation Menu to interdict PAVN operations demonstrated that the Johnson Administration’s failures were not simply a lack of will.

The Nixon administration had settled on the policy of “Vietnamization” by 1971. Nixon wrote Kissinger: “Looking ahead on Vietnam we must take several political factors into

²² Isaacson, *Kissinger*, pp. 256-257.

consideration as we draw near to the Democratic Convention in early July.”²³ The progressive withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam was tied to immunizing Nixon from Democratic criticism that he had not ended the war. While Vietnamization insulated Nixon from domestic political criticism, it threatened the American position at the negotiating table.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam Politbureau’s strategy for bringing the US involvement in Vietnam to an end was structured around Vietnamization. De-Americanization and Vietnamization in effect represented unilateral U.S. troop withdrawals from Indochina.

“We will not put forward a counterproposal for two reasons: (a) Through his 12 November statement, Nixon appears very stubborn. The gradual troop withdrawal is aimed at implementing Vietnamization, while at the same time maintaining indefinitely a certain military force as a bargaining chip with us.”²⁴

The American bargaining position was thus potentially compromised. The DRV had no reason to concede at the bargaining table for what the US was doing by its own impetus. The North would wait until the maximum level of Vietnamization occurred because this would also be the minimum “bargaining chip force” Nixon was willing to maintain.

The strategic objectives of Hanoi’s Politbureau were the removal of Thieu and withdrawal of US military forces from Indochina. Hanoi hoped that these objectives could be achieved in the coming spring offensive. By November 1971, Hanoi was prepared to negotiate in earnest in Paris if the Spring 1972 offensive failed to achieve their strategic objectives.

Hanoi, in a typically obtuse diplomatic phrasing, did consider a contingency policy if the spring offensive failed, “deliverance of a counter-proposal still depends on our strategic scheme.”²⁵ Thus, by November 1971, Hanoi was prepared to negotiate in earnest in Paris if the

²³ Memorandum Nixon to Kissinger Mar. 4, 1972, in: Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, p. 204.

²⁴ Message, Hanoi Political Bureau to Vietnamese Delegation in Paris, November 17, 1971, in: Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, p. 199.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

spring 1972 offensive failed to achieve their strategic objectives i.e. oust Thieu and push the U.S. forces out of Indochina. The lack of progress up to the spring offensive at the negotiating table was a result of the North's confidence and persistence of the Nixon administration's position to not abandon their ally. Nixon had not promised peace in 1968 only to deliver more war, but rather he continued to "reject peace at any price."

During the Easter-Offensive from March 30 – October 22, 1972, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN)²⁶ was fairly confident that Southern defenses were sufficiently weak and that they could roll back the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)²⁷ as they had in the aftermath of the Lam Son 719 raid into Laos in 1971. "The combat strength of the Saigon puppet army deteriorated...and was forced to spread their forces thin to occupy areas vacated by the withdrawal of 300,000 U.S. troops..."²⁸ Perhaps the PAVN forgot that what saved ARVN in the spring of '71 was not de-Americanization but the massive strength of U.S. air power, which was unaffected by de-Americanization.

The White House responded to the 1972 Easter Offensive by strategic bombing of Northern infrastructure and operational targets in the South as well as mining Northern harbors (these operations were codenamed "Operation Linebacker 1."). The American air counterattack²⁹, in conjunction with ARVN ground forces, broke the Northern offensive. While the air effort could not win the war, something strategic bombing never seems able to do despite its supporters, it preserved the stalemated status quo. No longer did the unilateral withdrawal of

²⁶ The People's Army of Vietnam was the armed forces of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam i.e. North Vietnamese communists.

²⁷ The Army of the Republic of Vietnam was the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam i.e. South Vietnam.

²⁸ "The People's Army, Local Armed Forces, and the Entire Population Launch the 1972 Strategic Offensive and Defeat the Enemy's Second War of Destruction against North Vietnam," *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975 : The Military History Institute of Vietnam*, Trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas Press, 2002), pp. 283-311 (here 283).

²⁹ A counterattack is discrete from a counteroffensive in that the former does not seek a strategic objective but to only blunt or stop an attack or offensive maneuver.

U.S. ground troops appear to guarantee inevitable Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)³⁰ victory. By preserving the status quo, the air counterattack pushed the DRV to return to the Paris peace table.

Going back to the birth of the aircraft, there has been a debate as to whether they could and should be used in a tactical or strategic capacity. The military strategist Giulio Douhet's "The Command of the Air" argued that once air supremacy was established, bombing raids on civilian populations should be conducted to destroy the people's will to fight. The destruction wrought by aerial bombardment would undercut the popular support for the opposing side, seen as perpetuating the conflict. This does not seem to hold empirically, to say nothing of the immorality of such a strategy. While during the Vietnam War civilians were deliberately avoided during B-52 raids on the north, there was still the debate within the military and political sphere as to whether they should be used in a tactical or strategic fashion.

During the aerial counterattack (not counter offensive) against the Northern 1971 Spring Offensive, Nixon ordered American air power to attack Hanoi, miles away from the front lines and active fighting. Military commanders wished to use more air power tactically against Northern troops along the front and against supply lines. This underscores how the White House saw the conflict in political terms while the military saw the conflict in military terms. Here Nixon sought to destroy the political organization that brought forth so many of his problems rather than attack the immediate threat.

The Vietnam War was always a limited war from the perspective of Washington, much to the chagrin of military commanders in the field and hawks in Washington. There was never serious considerations to invade the North and capture Hanoi. Memories of the Chinese counter-offensive across the Yalu River during the Korean War and the potential for nuclear escalation

³⁰ The Democratic Republic of Vietnam is the North Vietnamese government.

with the Soviets ensured that the commitment of American forces in Indochina would be limited to propping up the Saigon regime and not overthrow its greatest threat, the communist government in Hanoi. The conceptualization of the conflict in part determined the eventual ignominious withdrawal of American forces as had Hanoi's determination. The war would never have had taken the fight to the enemies' doorstep.

Contrary to Douhet's theory, strategic bombardment, whether carpet bombing or targeted, rarely brings an enemy to its knees. Bombing the North did put pressure on Hanoi, but it would have never led to surrender on terms which could truly be considered a victory. The lack of willingness for America to pursue targets which could bring victory was neither a mistake nor a pitiful half measure. Rather, the self-imposed limitations placed on the conflict are symptomatic of a recognition that Vietnam was not worth all the blood and treasure it would take to win it.

If the United States mobilized towards a war economy on a footing similar to that of World War II, then Vietnam could have eventually been unified under the capital of Saigon. But it was not worth the cost. This problem created a double bind in American thought. On the one hand, Vietnam had to be justified as a necessary piece in a global chess match against communism. And on the other, a declaration of war and full mobilization was not warranted because in fact, Vietnam was not the fulcrum between freedom and tyranny. Thus the quandary, going and staying in Vietnam was necessary, but not doing what winning required was the actual strategy pursued. The contradiction of Vietnam is the root cause for the American revulsion over the Fall of Saigon in 1975.

The limited fashion in which Vietnam was engaged led to a stalemate between the two opposing sides. The North could not overcome the vastly superior firepower of the American

military and the American military could not undo or overcome its self-imposed restrictions. After the stalemate of spring of 1971, Hanoi's thinking understood that to win the war, they would have to remove the United States from the playing field. In order to accomplish this task they turned towards negotiations in Paris.

The military stalemate and the American policy of "decent interval" oddly placed the means to the preferred policy goals of the DRV and the White House in congruence. After the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973, the PAVN chief of staff General Van Tien Dung alluded to their strategy in a statement:

"The agreement represented a big victory for our people and a big defeat for the U.S. imperialists and their lackeys, the result of eighteen years of determined and persistent struggle by our army and people under the correct leadership of our party. The Paris Agreement marked an important step forward in our people's revolutionary struggle, and opened up a new period in the South Vietnamese revolution: the period for completing the people's democratic revolution, and for reuniting the country. That would be the final phase of the people's democratic revolution in general, and of revolutionary war in the South in particular."³¹

The withdrawal of all American forces and a ceasefire would serve the DRV's goal of weakening ARVN by removing the decisive air support and served the White House's goal of peace with honor in Vietnam.

IV – The War for Peace 1972/73

In a memorandum from Nixon to Kissinger on March 11, 1972, Nixon wrote to Kissinger, "Looking ahead on Vietnam we must take several political factors into consideration as we draw near to the Democratic Convention in early July."³² Nixon's principal concern in the

³¹ "Vietnam, The End 1975," *Vietnam, The End 1975*, <http://ehistory.osu.edu/vietnam/essays/theend/0002.cfm> (last accessed March 15, 2014).

³² Memorandum Nixon to Kissinger, March 11, 1972, in: Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 204.

second half of his first presidential term was his reelection in 1972. The Vietnam War had just destroyed the reelection prospects of his predecessor, President Lyndon Johnson. Nixon knew that he had to make significant progress on his 1968 campaign promise to withdraw U.S. forces from Indochina.

During the 1968 campaign Nixon claimed he had a secret strategy to end the war in Vietnam. There was no secret plan. This promise was nothing more than a campaign ploy to garner votes. Once in office the Nixon administration cycled through a number of strategies. The policy the Nixon administration had settled on by 1971 was Vietnamization. The progress of Vietnamization was directly tied to political concerns, namely isolating Nixon from Democratic criticism that he had not ended the war. In a strategy meeting with his staff Nixon stated:

“We can be sure, however, that once their convention meets with the antiwar crowd constituting a majority of the delegates they will have a platform plank and an acceptance speech on the part of their candidate which will take us on hard on this issue unless we have defused it substantially by that time.”³³

If Nixon managed to reduce the number of US combat troops in Vietnam by mid July 1972, then he would disarm the Democrats from a powerful political attack in the election year.

Nixon explained to Kissinger, that he could not go all out in reducing U.S. force levels in Indochina because he needed to address the countervailing concern of success in negotiations at Paris: “I do not want to do anything in the April announcement that will in any way reduce the chances for some success on the negotiating front in the meetings you have in Paris at that time.”³⁴ Some residual U.S. troops were required to stay in Vietnam as a bargaining chip; this was recognized by Hanoi’s Politburo. Vietnamization must obtain a balance between domestic

³³ Memorandum Nixon to Kissinger, March 11, 1972, in: Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 204.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

politics and international power relations in Vietnam to have had achieve success at the polls and the negotiating table.

In the early stages of rapprochement with the People's Republic of China Nixon sent a memo to Kissinger: "We should give every encouragement to the attitude that this administration is exploring possibilities of rapprochement with the Chinese." By reestablishing diplomatic relations with China, the United States could show it was in a position to bring about peace in the region. As Nixon told Kissinger on 22 July, 1971, "We're doing the China thing to screw the Russians and help us in Vietnam and to keep the Japanese in line, get another ball in play."³⁵ The United States opening to China and his policy of Vietnamization went hand in hand with Nixon's strategic withdrawal from Vietnam. Also rapprochement with China would change the geopolitical field in favor of the United States.

Clashes along the Sino-Soviet border in March 1969 signaled the possibility of the Soviet Union attacking China. This was a major cause for rapprochement. At a National Security Council meeting on 14 August 1969 President Nixon said, "that it was against our interests to let China be 'smashed' in a Sino-Soviet war."³⁶ Nixon's opening came at the same time vis-à-vis China and the Soviet Union; he could use the Chinese to put pressure on the Soviets to push for arms control, and used the Soviets to pressure on China to in turn put pressure on North Vietnam to be more negotiable.³⁷

Nixon already thought that isolation of China was madness; he had written an article in *Foreign Affairs* in October 1967 advocating the reestablishment diplomatic ties with China. Similarly Mao had his "four Marshals" write a report on the strategic situation of China. They

³⁵ Warner, "Nixon, Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China, 1969-1972," 771.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 764.

³⁷ Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

advocated creating diplomatic relations with the United States as a means to discourage a Soviet attack.

Vietnam was the priority from Nixon's perspective despite war tensions between the USSR and China. Nixon leveraged Beijing to pressure Hanoi to end the Vietnam War. The peace agreement signed with Beijing's help allowed for the cancellation of operation Duck Hook – a military operation which considered the use of nuclear weapons to pressure North Vietnam to surrender. This helped Nixon's reelection bid as the “peace candidate.”

Nixon's “China Notes” from February 15 and 18, 1972, demonstrate the holistic conceptualization of Nixon's geopolitics:

“*Time---Priority*

1. Taiwan – most *crucial*.
2. V. Nam – most *urgent*.
3. Korea –
4. Japan –
5. India –
6. USSR – (no objection to U.S. relations with other countries)... [sic]

V. Nam:

1. We are ending our involvement
2. We had hoped you would help, but now it doesn't matter.
3. We must end it honorable -- & will.
 - Our last offer. It doesn't matter to us.

Russia is responsible for egging Hanoi on.

S. V. Nam is stronger than you think.

RN doctrine does not mean *withdrawal*.

“Glorious act” – cannot be defeat for a great nation....

What they want:

1. Build up their world credentials.
2. Taiwan.
3. Get us out of Asia.

What we want:

1. Indochina (?).
2. Communication – to restrain Chinese expansion in Asia.
3. In future – reduce threat of confrontation by Chinese superpower.

What we both want:

1. Reduce danger of confrontation & conflict.
2. A more stable Asia.
3. A restraint on USSR....

Soviet

1. Trying to “free its hand” in Europe & Mideast to concentrate elsewhere.
 - Want U.S. hand to be tied down in V. Nam.
2. If U.S. becomes isolationist – “withdraws” from Asia, e.g. – Soviet will fill the vacuum....

V. Nam:

1. Only Russians have interest in continuing.
2. We shall settle with Hanoi – but not surrender.
3. Will react to their attacks.
4. Would appreciate your help – but would hurt you with Russia.
 - You support liberation movements.
1. Where it conflicts with our interests we will respond.
2. We can’t “get out” – let others stay in.”³⁸

Nixon’s China Notes demonstrates his strategy for “peace with honor” and not “peace at any price.” He, more than anyone, wanted to bring about peace in Vietnam; though largely to win political points. However, whatever peace he could achieve had to be reconcilable with his view of America’s continuing role in geopolitics. “We shall settle...but not surrender” is as much reflective about Nixon’s view of Vietnam as it is his view of America’s role within the whole world. America had to draw out the poison that was Vietnam in order to lead the free world against communism.

Kissinger noted vis-à-vis China’s Premier Zhou Enlai: “What we require is a transition period between the military withdrawal and the political evolution ...and...if after the American withdrawal, the Indochinese people change their governments, the U.S. will not interfere.”³⁹

Kissinger’s neutral tone hides a really explosive idea; America would let their ally in Saigon fall

³⁸ Nixon’s China Notes, Feb. 15/18, 1971, in: Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 201.

³⁹ Memorandum of conversation between Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger and Premier of the People’s Republic of China Zhou Enlai on July 10, 1971, in: Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 191.

after they withdrew. While this should be taken with a grain of salt considering the audience, it is truly representative of Kissinger's devious thinking. Despite the survival of Thieu being the *raison d'être* for the American presence in Indochina, Kissinger was willing to forsake him if it meant the North Vietnamese negotiating position could be leveraged by Beijing.

Zhou responded that the People's Republic of China (PRC)⁴⁰ would "not interfere" with bilateral negotiations and not, despite the wished for linkage between Beijing and Hanoi, actively help the US.⁴¹ Zhou informed Kissinger "And I have told you before that as a matter of principle we support the PRG's seven-point proposal. ... Although we have given such large amounts of assistance to Vietnam, we never intervene in their internal affairs. The final decision lies with the Vietnamese."⁴² Zhou demurred when Kissinger presumed to link normalizing Sino-American relations to pressuring Hanoi to be more conciliatory.

The internal politics of communism was such that both the PRC and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were competing for the title of leader of world communism. Thus, neither the PRC nor the USSR could pressure Hanoi to be more tractable in Paris because it would shift the patronage of Hanoi to the other communist superpower. Trilateral diplomacy internal to communism was constructed around a third world pivot – the tail wagging the dog. Reconstructing the balance of power to shift its pivot to the United States would create peace as conceptualized by the Nixon administration. The two communist superpowers had to be competing for favorable relationships with Washington and not Hanoi.

On 18 September, 1972, Kissinger in a memorandum to President Richard Nixon presented a summary of the virtue of a decent interval, "We could heal the wounds in this

⁴⁰ The People's Republic of China is the government of mainland China with their capital in Beijing.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

⁴² Memorandum of Conversation, PM Chou (Zhou) to Kissinger, October 21, 1971, in: Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 191.

country as our men left peace behind on the battlefield and a healthy interval for South Vietnam's fate to unfold."⁴³ Kissinger rephrased the pitch he gave to Zhou for the President's consumption. Kissinger understood that Nixon had to see their withdrawal from Vietnam as a victory, or at least not a defeat. The September 18 memorandum does not specify the fate which was awaiting South Vietnam, whereas, when speaking with Zhou, Kissinger outrightly spoke of Saigon's fall. The conceptualization of a decent interval cut the American position away from the survival of the Thieu regime in a subtle way.

By September 26-27, 1972, the tenor of talks changed from stagnation to a sense that progress could occur rapidly. Kissinger reported to Nixon on his talks with the North Vietnamese, "*Their new plan, though still unacceptable, shows major movement in some respect* [Kissinger's emphasis]."⁴⁴ North Vietnam reduced the political powers of the Government of National Concord. Further concessions by the North to dismantle the body would come on 8 October. Kissinger's meeting with Zhou greased the wheels of diplomacy sending the message that the U.S. was willing to accept a natural death for the Saigon regime as long as America was not standing over the body.

The first sign that the talks on 8 October would be different were the two thick green folders in front of the Special Advisor Le Duc Tho. From the beginning of the meeting until when they broke for lunch, Kissinger's eyes did not wonder far from those green folders.⁴⁵ Tho extended the lunch recess until 4:00 pm, leaving the American delegation "tense over what was to come."⁴⁶

⁴³ Kimball, *The Vietnam War*, p. 198.

⁴⁴ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon in Washington, September 28, 1972, in: Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. VIII: *Vietnam January-October 1972* (Washington, D.C.: U.S Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 978 [hereinafter cites as FRUS with appropriate volume number].

⁴⁵ Samuel Lipsman and Stephen Weiss, *The False Peace, 1972-74* (Boston, MA: Boston Pub., 1985), p. 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Tho acknowledges the problem of public negotiations at Kleber Street, “If we adopt this method [public negotiations at Kleber Street], I don’t know how long it will take to come to agreement and to end the war, to restore peace.”⁴⁷ Kissinger readily agreed with Tho, “That’s what I have been trying to tell the Special Advisor for two months.”⁴⁸ By agreeing that the public negotiations would falter, they implicitly asserted their willingness to make serious concessions in private.

Tho modified the name of the “Government of National Concord” to the “Administration of National Concord” and the role it would play in Vietnamese politics after the cease-fire. The Administration of National Concord would be tasked with “organizing” elections. The body would consist of representatives from the PRG, GVN, and independent individuals the two could agree upon. Most importantly, the Administration of National Concord could only take action with unanimous assent by the body. Article 12 emphatically stated, “The Council shall operate on the principle of unanimity.”⁴⁹ Thieu would thereby have a veto over any action proposed by the Administration of National Concord. As such, the body was destined before its birth for deadlock.

The political contention between Kissinger and Tho was the future status of the GVN (Saigon regime) and South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu. Knowing the unpopularity of the GVN, Tho framed his demand for US withdrawing their opposition for the inclusion of the Provisionary Revolutionary Government (PRG) as “the exercise of the South Vietnamese

⁴⁷ Memorandum of Conversation Paris, October 8, 1972, in: Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. IX: *Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), p. 2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Multilateral and Bilateral. Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam. Agreements and Protocols: Signed Jan. 27, 1973. *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*. Vol. 24 Part 1. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974) pp. 1-225 (here p. 10).

people's right to self-determination.”⁵⁰ Thieu was adamantly opposed to allowing the PRG any role in South Vietnam's politics after a ceasefire. Tho's obtuse reference to “...the two South Vietnamese parties...”⁵¹ offered the political connotations of providing the PRG with such a role. Kissinger's October agreement was unacceptable to Thieu, in part, because of this political concession to the North Vietnamese.

Tho acknowledge that, given the electoral politics of the 1972 election, the Nixon Administration could not appear to abandon their ally Thieu in order to gain peace in Vietnam; that would be tantamount to total defeat.⁵² Tho used this explanation to cloak the concession that negotiations for peace no longer need be contingent on US withdrawing their support for Thieu. It is difficult to understate the importance of this concession in the rapid development of the Paris Talks in October 1972.

Tho also removed the demand for the US to cease all military aid to Saigon. Rather, Hanoi and Washington would be permitted to a policy of “replacement of armament” for their allied forces in South Vietnam. In actuality, the U.S. Congress was aligning to restrict any such funding and the North Vietnamese would outright support and collude with the NLF in South Vietnam.

Despite the stipulation that all foreign troops withdraw from South Vietnam in 60 days, NVA troops already present at the time of the cease-fire would remain, but no new NVA troops would infiltrate the South. In the coming days, Tho refused to negotiate on this point for the very good reason that Hanoi did not recognize South Vietnam as “foreign.” An important element of the proposed agreement was that the US would recognize the 1954 Geneva Agreements which

⁵⁰ Memorandum of Conversation Paris, October 8, 1972, in: FRUS, Vol. IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, p. 5.

⁵¹ Memorandum of Conversation Paris, October 8, 1972, in: FRUS, Vol. IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, p. 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

asserted the territorial integrity of Vietnam.⁵³ Specifically, “the 17th parallel is only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary...”⁵⁴

Tho wished to change the prerogative of the newly renamed Administration of National Concord. The US proposal at the time called for the body to “facilitate” and “contribute” towards national reconciliation. Tho sought to more clearly define the role of the body as, “...to direct, to supervise, the implementation of the agreements.”⁵⁵ The characterization of the role this political body should play was one of the more salient issues during the intervening months between October 1972 and January 1973, however inconsequential it turned out to be.

Tho then derided Kissinger’s trademark constructive ambiguity in the structure of the proposed body, “If you say the task of the body is to review the policy, the constitution and to make it suitable to the conditions of peace, then it is in too vague of terms.”⁵⁶ The fudging of details allowed Kissinger to overcome deadlocks, often to the chagrin of his interlocutors.

Between October 9 and 11, 1972, more details of the proposed agreements were hammered out while Kissinger began coordinating with the White House to organize a narrative of the events in Paris. The Administration of National Concord had its name changed again to the Council of National Reconciliation and Concord (NCNRC). While the Administration of National Concord was “required” to settle the political issue within 90 days⁵⁷, the NCNRC was mandated in Article 12, for “The two South Vietnamese parties shall...do their utmost to accomplish this within ninety days...”⁵⁸ Here again, what was once the idea of a robust coalition

⁵³ FRUS, Vol., IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, pp. iv-v.

⁵⁴ *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Memorandum of Conversation Paris, October 8, 1972, in: FRUS, Vol. IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, p. 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ Samuel/ Weiss, *The False Peace*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*, p. 10.

government, became a toothless and powerless body. The NCNRC served a symbolic function in the course of the negotiations. By the end it was little more than a bargaining chip.

While Tho explicitly stated that NVA troops would not withdraw from the South because the South was not “foreign”, he argued that the agreement could not contain reference to troop withdrawals from Laos and Cambodia because they were sovereign nations and Tho could not negotiate for them. However, Tho conceded the understanding that within the context of Cambodia, NVA troops were in fact “foreign” and therefore would withdraw with other foreign troops.⁵⁹ Tho allowed for a cease-fire in Laos 30 days after the agreement was signed but made no similar promise for Cambodia citing Hanoi’s lack of control over the Khmer Rouge.

In Chapter VII, Article 20 § (a), the sovereignty and neutrality of Laos and Cambodia was explicitly stated. The situation on the ground was, however, more complex than Art. 20 § (a) lets on. This portion of the January 1973 agreements was signed with a hint of cynicism, particularly on the North Vietnamese side. Effectively every section of Article 20 was violated during the Cambodian-Vietnamese War, with the possible exception of Art. 20 § (d).

Tho had proposed on the October 11, linking the release of American POWs with the release of political prisoners in Saigon’s jails. Kissinger had rejected this condition and the question remained unresolved by October 11.⁶⁰ The protocols to the January agreement had the effect Tho proposed in October 1972. In Article 1 of the protocols, “...- all captured military personnel of the United states...shall be returned...- all captured Vietnamese military personnel...shall be returned...”⁶¹ This applied to both regular and irregular forces and a similar provision in the following article applied to civilian prisoners (a euphemism for spies).

⁵⁹ Samuel/Weiss, *The False Peace*, p. 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.13

⁶¹ *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*, p. 25.

On October 9, 1972, H.R. Haldeman wrote in his diary, “A big question this morning arising from a Top Secret cable from Henry [Kissinger] saying there was some progress at the session in Paris, but it was imperative to have [Secretary of State] Rogers avoid any reference to Vietnam in his press conference.”⁶²

In the Memorandum from Kissinger to President Nixon Haldeman refers to in his diary Kissinger wrote, “It is even more important to be silent as to substance. We are at a crucial point.”⁶³ Haldeman’s diary entry shows that Secretary of State William P. Rogers was a non-factor in the Nixon Administration’s first term foreign policy formulation. Rogers functioned primarily as an administrator of the State Department while Nixon and Kissinger conducted US foreign policy from the restructured National Security Council, which cut out the State Department almost entirely. Rogers lacked significant foreign policy experience which made him a logical choice for Secretary of State for a President who wished to have more control over US foreign policy.⁶⁴

Haldeman continued to record that Rogers’ comments on Vietnam would mirror the President’s adding that “...this was no time for throwing in the towel.” Rogers’ addition was a jab at George McGovern’s campaign promise to immediately withdraw US troops from Vietnam. Progress in the Paris talks undercut McGovern’s “peace at any cost” platform by giving the appearance that “peace with honor” was imminent.

Going into the Election of 1972, there were two sides of equally odd bed fellows. The group which favored peace before the November election consisted of Kissinger, the NSC staffer Winston Lord, and Tho. The side which favored a delayed peace accords consisted of Nixon,

⁶² H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 513.

⁶³ Memorandum Kissinger to Haldeman, in: FRUS, Vol. IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, p. 12.

⁶⁴ Arms, *Encyclopedia of the Cold War*, p. 486.

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Nixon's Chief of Staff Alexander Haig, and Thieu, who favored no peace at all.⁶⁵

Nixon feared that any deal reached before Election Day would be negatively received by the American public as a political maneuver. Nixon's thinking was based on how he himself played Johnson's push for peace in 1968, which helped Nixon secure the presidency. However, Nixon could not be sure that no settlement would be reached by cancelling the talks. Public opinion was vastly in favor of continuing the talks. Nixon had to walk the fine line between reaching a settlement and continuing talks. Thieu was Nixon's solution to maintain his self-imposed balancing act. Nixon communicated with Thieu to hold out until after the 1972 presidential election. Nixon did, however, make it clear that Thieu was not to oppose a settlement after the election.⁶⁶

Haig and Laird both believed that further military pressure could improve the bargaining position in the Paris Peace Talks. After Nixon secured his second term, he would be able to authorize increased military pressure on the North in the form of air strikes and aid to the Saigon regime. The post-election public mandate exercised or not, would increase American leverage at the negotiating table. Rushing to a settlement in October did not serve the US or Saigon position in the settlement.⁶⁷

However, the failure of the Republican Party to make any electoral gains in the Congressional elections after 1972 destroyed any chance for a public mandate to continue the air war in Vietnam. With both houses of Congress controlled by Democrats, and supported by a war-weary public, the military option would inevitably face legislative opposition when Congress prevented future bombing in Indochina.

⁶⁵ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, p. 429.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 446.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

In September 1972, Kissinger underestimated Thieu's opposition to the proposed settlement of a cease-fire and the political role for the PRG in the South. Kissinger wrongly interpreted Thieu's diplomatic rejection as equivocal and not an emphatic rejection in principle. His misreading of Thieu was cause for his genuine surprise later in October.

Nixon and Haig believed that Kissinger was pushing hard for a settlement in order to take all the credit for bringing an end to the war in Vietnam (an accomplishment for which Kissinger would later receive a Nobel Peace Prize). In order to lull Kissinger into a false confidence, Haig and Nixon presented their positions as totally in agreement with Kissinger's settlement strategy. Kissinger would then feel confident that he only had to convince Tho and not Nixon and Thieu.

By 17 October, 1972, the President more emphatically stated his opposition to Kissinger in a typically oblique Nixonian style. Haig cabled Kissinger stating that Thieu's acceptance to the agreement as it stood was a prerequisite for going forward. Nixon could count on Thieu rejection of the agreements Kissinger had reached with Tho in Paris, so thwarted Kissinger's attempt to be the man who brought peace. On October 19, Nixon sent a cable giving support to the October Accords that Kissinger would soon present to Thieu. This cable was for the benefit of the historical record – Nixon could reference it was proof positive that he had supported the peace effort in October. Nixon also messaged Thieu that he would support Saigon and “seek to rectify the situation” if Thieu rejected the agreement.⁶⁸

Kissinger returned to Washington on October 12, 1972, and reported to the President the general framework of the proposed agreement. Nixon and Haig believed Thieu was unlikely to accept the agreement Kissinger reached in the previous days and reacted coldly towards it.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, pp. 446-447.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 447.

Thieu rejected the October Agreement in a series of objections from October 17 to December 19, 1972. He was not prepared to accept a cease-fire that would leave between 140,000 and 300,000 NVA troops inside the territory of South Vietnam.⁷⁰ He had specifically stated his opposition to a cease-fire in place back in July and August.⁷¹ A cease-fire status quo ante would theoretically remove NVA troops from South Vietnam, but was not diplomatically possible. On August 17, in Saigon, Thieu stated emphatically: “We have no reason for a ceasefire now.”⁷²

Recognizing the PRG in the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord would, Thieu feared, give the PRG legal sovereignty over the South Vietnamese territory they controlled.⁷³ The cease-fire in place and recognition of the PRG as a formal party gave the Communists in the North a military and political legitimacy, respectively, that undercut Thieu’s authority as South Vietnam’s President. Thieu was also deeply concerned with the potential for the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord to become the staging ground for a coalition government, and ultimately a Communist takeover.

On November 24, 1972, in a cable from Nixon to Kissinger, Nixon said, “...[leading Congressional Democrats and Republicans] were not only unanimous but vehement in stating their conclusions that if Saigon is the only roadblock for reaching agreement on this basis they will personally lead the fight when the new Congress reconvenes on January 3 to cut off all military and economic assistance to Saigon.”⁷⁴ If Thieu remained adamant in his opposition, Congress would push for exclusively bilateral negotiations between Washington and Hanoi and cutting Saigon off from military assistance. The failure to agree to the less than ideal settlement had worse consequences for Thieu than capitulating to the concessions outlined in October.

⁷⁰ FRUS Vol. IX, October 1972 – January 1973, p. v.

⁷¹ Lipsman/Weiss, *The False Peace*, p. 14.

⁷² FRUS, Vol VIII, Vietnam October 1972, p. 862.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 862.

⁷⁴ Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, p. 261.

Nixon found it outrageous that Linebacker II received the nicknamed “Christmas Day Bombings” because the operation unfolded from December 18 to 29, in no bombings took place on the December 25. While this fact makes the nickname somewhat of a misnomer, Nixon was probably more upset over the juxtaposition between the two terms “Christmas” and “Bombings” and the juxtapositions affect on his public image rather than the technical misnomer.

Nixon’s thinking was clear, if Linebacker I brought the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table ready to make concessions in the fall of 1972, then a similar strike (appropriately named Linebacker II) would produce a similar conciliatory stance by the North Vietnamese with continued deadlock. Kissinger’s aide John D. Negroponte characterized the goal of Linebacker II as “...bombing them to force them to accept our concessions.”⁷⁵ Nixon was right, by 26 December, the North were again willing to meet to negotiate, this time in January 1973.

The ever duplicitous Nixon had more than one reason for executing Linebacker II. The operation had the intent to prove to Thieu America’s continued willingness to support Saigon. If Thieu agreed to the cease-fire, then he would have the entire air power of the US as an enforcer of that agreement. “According to Haig, [Thieu] observed: “what I am being asked to sign is not a treaty for peace but a treaty for continued U.S. support.”⁷⁶

On 23 January, 1973, Kissinger and Tho initialed the agreement entitled, “Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.” It was later signed on 27 January, by Secretary of State William Rogers for the United States; Tran Van Lam, Minister of Foreign Affairs, for South

⁷⁵ Szulc, *Illusion of Peace*, p. 641.

⁷⁶ FRUS, IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, p.vi.; Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1994), p. 311.

Vietnam; Nguyen Duy Trinh, Minister for Foreign Affairs, for North Vietnam; and Nguyen Thi Binh, Minister of Foreign Affairs, for the Provisional Revolutionary Government (Viet Cong).⁷⁷

Few changes actually occurred in the intervening months between the agreement reached in early October 1972 and the one finally concluded in late January 1973. Chapter I “The Vietnamese People’s Fundamental National Rights”, Article 1 of Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam states, “The United States and all other countries respect the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Viet-Nam as recognized by the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Viet-Nam.”⁷⁸ This provision more than the NCNRC provided the legal basis for a unified Vietnam. Tho had proposed such a provision back in October

V – Conclusion: All Politics is Local⁷⁹

Nixon saw Vietnam as a feature of electoral politics for his 1972 reelection campaign. Peace in Vietnam was not a humanitarian imperative from the perspective of the Oval Office or the White House. The progressing peace talks in Paris would take the wind out of McGovern’s sails. Why vote for “peace at any price” when “peace with honor” is at hand?

Electoral politics was not the only concern of Nixon regarding peace in Vietnam. Kissinger threatened to steal away the glory of delivering peace from the President, a victory he believed he won. It would be terrible for Nixon to take all the flak for the continuation of the war and then have the National Security Advisor swoop in and steal the prize. Nixon’s plan for implementing peace sought to negate McGovern and put Kissinger in his place.

Every army, every leader, and every nation is fighting for peace, but peace on their terms. Peace as such is not a binary opposition, namely being for or against it. Peace policy can range

⁷⁷ FRUS, Vol. IX, Vietnam October 1972 – January 1973, p. v.

⁷⁸ Multilateral and Bilateral, Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam. Agreements and Protocols: Signed Jan. 27, 1973, *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements*, Vol. 24 Part 1, pp. 1-225. (here p. 5).

⁷⁹ Former Speaker of the U.S. House Tip O’Neill coined this phrase.

from total destruction of an opponent to unilateral withdrawal. In a continued time of war, it would be good to remember that not all peace plans are alike.

Bibliography

I. Primary Sources

a. Documentary Collections

Kimball, Jeffrey P. *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-era Strategy*. Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2004.

U.S. Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VIII: Vietnam, January–October 1972*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010.

------. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume IX: Vietnam, October 1972–January 1973*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010.

United States Treaties and Other International Agreements. Vol. 24 Part 1. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974.

b. Memoirs and Diaries

Haig, Alexander M., Jr.. *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1994.

H. R. Haldeman. *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979.

II. Secondary Sources

a. Print

Arms, Thomas S. *Encyclopedia of the Cold War*. New York, NY: Facts on File, 1994.

Dallek, Robert. *Nixon and Kissinger*. New York, NY: HaperCollins, 2007.

Isaacson, Walter. *Kissinger: A Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

Kissinger, Henry. *A World Restored; Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812-22*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

------. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

------. *On China*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

Leffler, Melvyn P. and Odd Arne Westad, eds. *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. II: Crises and Détente*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Lipsman, Samuel, and Stephen Weiss. *The False Peace, 1972-74*. Boston, MA: Boston Pub., 1985.

Merrill, Dennis and Thomas G. Paterson, eds. *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, Vol. II: Since 1914. Documents and Essays*. 7th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2010.

Starr, Harvey. "The Kissinger Years: Studying Individuals and Foreign Policy." *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1980): pp. 465-496.

Suri, Jeremi. *Henry Kissinger and the American Century*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

Szulc, Tad. "How Kissinger Did it: Behind the Vietnam Cease-Fire Agreement." *Foreign Policy*, No. 15 (Summer, 1974): pp. 21-69.

------. *Illusion of Peace*. New York, New York: Viking Press, 1978

Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954--1975 : The Military History Institute of Vietnam, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow. Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas, 2002. 283-311.

Warner, Geoffrey. "Nixon, Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China, 1969-1972." *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 4 (2006): pp. 763-781.

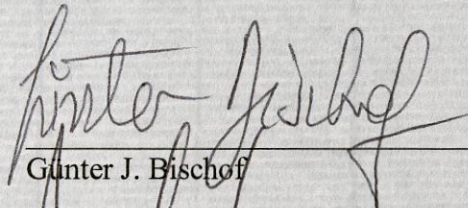
b. Digital

"Vietnam, The End 1975." *Vietnam, The End 1975*. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Nov. 2013. <<http://ehistory.osu.edu/vietnam/essays/theend/0002.cfm>>.

APPROVAL SHEET

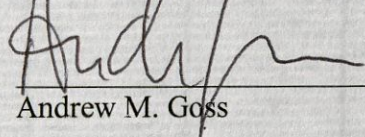
This is to certify that Jonathan Deyo Lumpkin has successfully completed his Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

The Politics of Peace for Vietnam: Paris Peace Conference 1972/1973



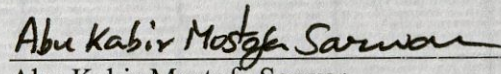
Gunter J. Bischof

Director of Thesis



Andrew M. Goss

Second Reader



Abu Kabir Mostofa Sarwar

for the University
Honors Program

May 1, 2014
Date

SOUTH WORTH
COLLECTION
- 25% Cotton Fiber
PRIVATE
STOCK