

the extent of Kissinger's considerable ability to do so, were Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers, both of whom, for various reasons, hoped to reinforce Nixon's initial impulse to extricate himself and the country from the war. Instead, Laird and Rogers were largely shut out of Vietnam decision making. More than any other U.S. endeavor of such magnitude before or since, Vietnam policy in the Nixon administration came under the utter domination of only two men, who grew steadily more impervious to any perspectives that differed from their own.

If there was a single act by which the Nixon administration closed the trap on itself, it was the decision to send U.S. forces into Cambodia at the end of April 1970.

All else they had done in Indochina, Nixon and Kissinger could claim—and the American public could agree—was a matter of cleaning up someone else's mess. But Cambodia was their own. Americans knew the half-million-man army flailing about in Vietnam was not sent there by Nixon, and they seemed willing to allow him a rather generous amount of time to extricate it in some fashion that would avoid national humiliation. They did want to see it extricated, though, and sending soldiers to fight in another Indochinese nation hardly seemed like the same thing. Neither did the strident, belligerent explanations from the White House. Cambodia could not be reconciled with Nixon's promise to end the war, and that, it seemed to me, was the real reason it generated such domestic outrage.

Anger at the Cambodian offensive was answered by an equal rage in the White House against its critics. But the more Nixon and Kissinger made the war theirs, the more damaging and painful failure appeared; and the more they had to defend their actions, the more they were compelled to assert illusory achievements and unreachable goals—like Lyndon Johnson, who was driven at last to lash out at Robert Kennedy, "We are going to win this war, and in six months all you doves will be politically dead." Nixon, too, especially after Cambodia, could only vindicate his decisions with success. That need nourished both the administration's wishful hope that Hanoi would somehow prove more flexible than it sounded and that it could be pressured into giving the U.S. an acceptable settlement, and its equally wishful overestimate of Saigon's effectiveness. Nixon's and Kissinger's expectations contradicted the realities that American influence on Vietnamese events was lessening as its military effort lessened and that there was no sustainable support for stronger measures; Hanoi, meanwhile, not the U.S., still controlled the pace and course of the war while remaining single-mindedly bent not on compromise, but victory.

Unable to resolve those contradictions, Nixon began to see the source of his frustrations in American, not Vietnamese, realities. Not Hanoi but the American antiwar movement "destroyed whatever small possibility may still have existed of ending the war in 1969," he wrote in his memoirs. His critics' motives were, in effect, treasonous. "North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that," he declared on November 3, 1969, in the "silent majority" speech he substituted for the military blows he had threatened. In that concept lay one significant