

they were everything. If the deterrent was used, deterrence would have failed. If the image did not do its preventive work and there was a resort to action, the whole purpose of the policy would have been defeated."

Since credibility could never be proven, the only way to establish it was to demonstrate its attributes in all other American actions in the world, while also avoiding failures or irresolution that might contradict the desired image. Thus, once U.S. forces were committed in Vietnam, the original reasons quickly lost their primacy. What became necessary for the United States was not any given set of results that could be defined as a success, but rather a display of American determination, effectiveness, and reliability as an ally. Had this not been true, the stated U.S. war aims could not have shifted so greatly during the course of the conflict. American patience was exhausted by a war whose dominant impression was of soldiers fighting again and again over the identical terrain, without advancing or retreating or winning or losing, without any apparent relationship to any other battles before or afterward, and without visible movement toward a decisive result. But that image was an accurate metaphor for the policy. The result of the war was less important to Washington than the act of fighting it.

The U.S. intervened in Vietnam initially with ideas of defeating a Communist insurgency, containing what it then saw as a menacing and expansionist China, and disproving theories of liberation war, among other reasons. By the time the Nixon administration came to power, however, what mattered fundamentally to the U.S. leadership was not what happened to the Vietnamese, much less to the Lao or the Cambodians, but what happened to the world's—and particularly the Soviet Union's—impression of American capability and resolve. Nixon's rapprochement with the Chinese leadership made much of the war's original rationale meaningless and thus made its actual outcome a matter of even less concern to him or to the American government. If some form of settlement on America's minimum terms could be reached, so much the better. But even if there were no settlement, or one that failed, that would not be critically damaging either, as long as the United States was not perceived to weaken.

Defining goals in Vietnam with regard to the American image elsewhere was not invented by the Nixon administration, by any means. As long ago as the beginning of 1962 the Joint Chiefs of Staff had argued for intervention on the grounds that, along with the defense of Southeast Asia from Communism, "of equal importance" was the "psychological impact that a firm position by the United States will have on the countries of the world—both free and Communist." The real trap lay in the negative of that proposition: "A United States political and/or military withdrawal . . . would have an adverse psychological impact," the Chiefs also warned, "of even greater proportion." This, when only a few more than 2,500 American soldiers had been sent to Vietnam and only a dozen or so had been killed or wounded.

Three years later, with the Johnson administration poised to commit major ground forces to the conflict, a Defense Department official, John McNaughton, wrote what would become one of the most widely quoted