

origin of the domestic abuses that would destroy his presidency: against adversaries who sought the defeat of the United States, any tactic, however extreme, could be justified.

In Indochina, meanwhile, though he carried on the war as intensely as the domestic political environment allowed, its purposes grew steadily more indistinct. Thoughts of victory—Johnson's "coonskin on the wall"—vanished in 1968, with Tet, the bombing halt, and the start of peace talks. Thereafter the definition of American objectives vanished by degrees, like Alice's Cheshire cat.

The Nixon administration first offered mutual withdrawals of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces, but then undermined its own proposal by starting to pull American troops out unilaterally. The concept of mutual withdrawal remained in the peace plans but was blurred by an ambiguous ceasefire-in-place proposal in October 1970. Subsequently, the demand for removal of North Vietnamese troops was dropped altogether. What still prevented agreement was only Hanoi's insistence on unacceptable political terms. The U.S. had no prescription of its own for a political settlement, suggesting only that the future should be decided by problematic negotiations between the Communists and Saigon.

Thus, by 1972 the specific, concrete demands of the United States on Hanoi had been reduced to exactly one: American prisoners must be returned. Beyond that, for American purposes, the U.S. asked Hanoi only for restraint—that is, that it not take advantage of American disengagement to humiliate the United States. How much restraint, and for how long, would satisfy that condition was never clear. For South Vietnam, despite the rhetoric of alliance that was customarily used, declared U.S. objectives did not even specify the indefinite survival of a non-Communist government. Washington said only that the South Vietnamese people should choose their political future freely, and not under the threat of violence. That aim accorded with American values but unhappily not with Vietnamese conditions, or with the historical experience of civil conflicts anywhere else in the world, including America's own.

The disconnection of American objectives from Vietnamese realities was not incidental or accidental or the quirk of personality or circumstance. It was imbedded in the most fundamental strategic concepts of the nuclear age. For the overriding consideration of American actions in Vietnam was not to bring about any specific Vietnamese outcome, but to assist what had become known as "credibility," the impression that the United States was tough enough and effective enough to meet its responsibilities in the world, defend its interests, and use its nuclear weapons for those purposes if forced to that choice. Credibility was (and remains) the psychological component of the deterrence concept, which holds that the only way to avoid using nuclear arms is to possess them in enough quantity to discourage any other possessor from using them. Similarly, if the image of credibility could be sufficiently conveyed, its reality would never have to be demonstrated. Appearances, in other words, as the writer Jonathan Schell pointed out in his book *The Time of Illusion*, "were not merely important to deterrence—