

of Southeast Asia but of the Mideast, he referred to the danger created when "two groups of countries with intense local rivalries . . . [are] backed by major countries, but not fully under the control of the major countries confronting each other." This, Kissinger said, "is the sort of situation that produced World War I." If world order was menaced when local rival states were "not fully under the control" of the major powers to whom they were allied, it followed that the superpowers were not only entitled but obliged to assert that control: the United States over nations under its influence and the Soviet Union over those in the Soviet orbit, in the name of the greater good of nuclear peace.

Obviously, this reasoning is not completely groundless, any more than is the concept of nuclear credibility. Regional disputes do raise the threat of possible superpower conflict. But Nixon and Kissinger characteristically saw *only* the Soviet-American dimension of all international issues. All other aspects were blotted out. On their mental map, the rest of the countries on the globe became blank spots, without individual character or history or motive, as lacking in feature and distinctive shape as squares on a chessboard.

Thus, though for years Vietnam preoccupied U.S. policy makers more than almost any other issue, the real Vietnam with all its particularities was hardly seen at all through Washington's lenses. The Vietnamese reasons for the conflict were irrelevant because they fell outside the circular logic of the American effort: the reason Americans had to prevail was because American troops and prestige were committed to doing so. Vietnam was vital because we had declared it vital, not for any attributes of its own. We were there, in a nutshell, because we were there. The war could have been anywhere else in the world and nearly all the issues and arguments, as far as Nixon and Kissinger were concerned, would have been the same. Their perspective almost demanded disregard of Vietnamese realities, in fact, for the Vietnamese circumstances so clearly failed to justify the size or cost of the American effort there. Rather than proceeding from an assessment of the actual events and the possible advantages or disadvantages of our intervention, American policy was stagecraft. Vietnam was an abstraction. And so, in the end, was the settlement that capped four excruciating years of Henry Kissinger's diplomacy.

The Paris agreement settled nothing but the issue of American involvement. The issue over which the war was fought—who would rule South Vietnam—was not resolved at all, but left to be negotiated along with other matters that all Vietnamese on both sides knew were not really negotiable. Even Secretary of State Rogers acknowledged that the political half of the agreement was "ambiguous, but deliberately ambiguous. We never pretended that it was definite and if we had attempted to work it out we would still be fighting."

The agreement was another illusion, detached from Vietnamese reality. Nor was it ever clear what Nixon or Kissinger really thought would be its outcome, except that presumably they believed it would meet their minimum condition of avoiding a clear American humiliation. The peace, in