

passages in the *Pentagon Papers*, expressing U.S. aims in percentage terms: "70%—to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor). 20%—to keep SVN (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands. 10%—to permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life."

Thus, when Nixon declared in 1969 that defeat in Vietnam "would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership not only in Asia but throughout the world" and would "promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest," he was not being at all inconsistent with previous American reasoning. The difference, though, was that by then all *other* goals of the intervention were vanishing. Thoughts of victory had evaporated, and nearly all specific demands on Hanoi were about to do the same.

Too, the more global-minded Nixon and Kissinger spun the credibility concept much farther from any local or regional circumstances than Johnson had. Though he was aware of more distant interests, Johnson normally focused on the classic assumptions of the domino theory: a failure of American resolve in Vietnam would endanger Thailand or Malaysia or, at a slightly greater distance, Indonesia and the Philippines. Nixon's and Kissinger's was a sort of super-domino theory. If America proved ineffectual in Vietnam, they thought, it would also be weakened—a "pitiful helpless giant"—in the Middle East, in strategic arms talks, everywhere on the globe, in fact, where important U.S. interests existed. Vietnam was part of a strategy in which everything was linked to the Soviet-American nuclear confrontation, and thus everything was also linked to everything else. The war there was limited, but to the extent that it was fought for the purpose of nuclear credibility, the stakes were unlimited. Vietnam was indivisible from preventing World III and saving the entire world, including the U.S., from possible nuclear blackmail and Communist totalitarianism. As Jonathan Schell put it, "the aim of upholding American credibility superseded any conclusions drawn from a simple accounting of tangible gains and tangible losses" in Vietnam.

Such an accounting would probably have dictated to most Americans—perhaps even Nixon and Kissinger—a policy of cutting losses and withdrawing. But, as Schell wrote, "The tangible objectives of limited war had been completely eclipsed by the psychological objective. The war had become an effort directed entirely toward building up a certain image by force of arms. It had become a piece of pure theatre."

For men who prided themselves on realism, Nixon and Kissinger were remarkably myopic about a world that was, inevitably, messier in reality than in strategists' theorizing. The issues of nuclear survival and their own balance-of-power design filled their vision so completely that they seemed not to grasp that other nations had other priorities. They acted as if they expected lesser nations to subordinate their own interests to superpower needs, on the ground that the safety of the entire world must override any narrow national goal.

The loss of superpower control, Nixon and Kissinger believed, was dangerous—as was explicitly spelled out by Kissinger when, speaking not