

ISSUE 16



Did President Nixon Negotiate a “Peace with Honor” in Vietnam in 1973?

YES: Richard Nixon, from *The Real War* (Warner Books, 1980)

NO: Larry Berman, from *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (The Free Press, 2001)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Former president Richard Nixon believes that the South Vietnamese government would not have lost the war to North Vietnam in 1975 if Congress had not cut off aid.

NO: According to Professor Larry Berman, President Nixon knew that the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973 were flawed, but he intended to bomb North Vietnamese troops to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam until he left office.

At the end of World War II, imperialism was coming to a close in Asia and anti-imperialist movements emerged all over Asia and Africa, often producing chaos. The United States faced a dilemma. On the one hand, America was a nation conceived in revolution and was sympathetic to the struggles of the Third World nations. On the other hand, the United States was afraid that many of the revolutionary leaders were Communists who would place their countries under the control of the expanding empire of the Soviet Union. By the late 1940s, the Truman administration decided that it was necessary to stop the spread of communism. The policy that resulted was known as “containment.”

The first true military test of the “containment” doctrine came soon. Korea, previously controlled by Japan, had been temporarily divided at the 38th Parallel at the end of World War II. Communists gained control of North Korea while anticommunist revolutionaries established a government in South Korea. When neither side would agree to a unified government, the temporary division became permanent. After North Korea attacked South Korea in late June 1950, President Truman led the nation into an undeclared war under United Nations auspices. The Korean War lasted 3 years and was fought to a stalemate.

Vietnam provided the second test of the “containment” doctrine in Asia. Vietnam had been a French protectorate from 1885 until Japan took control

during World War II. Shortly before the war ended, the Japanese gave Vietnam its independence but the French were determined to reestablish their influence in the area. Conflicts emerged between the French-led nationalist forces of South Vietnam and the Communist-dominated provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam established in Hanoi in August 1945. Ho Chi Minh was the president of the DRV. An avowed Communist since the 1920s, Ho had also become the major nationalist figure in Vietnam and managed to tie together the Communist and nationalist movements in Vietnam.

A full-scale war broke out in 1946 between the Communist government of North Vietnam and the French-dominated country of South Vietnam. The war lasted 8 years. After the Communists had inflicted a disastrous defeat on the French at the battle of Dienbienphu in May 1954, the latter decided to pull out. At the Geneva Conference the following summer, Vietnam was divided at the 17th Parallel pending elections.

The United States involvement in Vietnam came after the French withdrew. In 1955, the Republican President Dwight Eisenhower refused to recognize the Geneva Accords but supported the establishment of the South Vietnamese government. Its leader was Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1956 Diem, with United States approval, refused to hold elections that would have provided a unified government for Vietnam in accordance with the Geneva agreement. The Communists in the South responded by again taking up the armed struggle. The war continued unabated for another 19 years.

Both President Eisenhower and his Democratic successor, John F. Kennedy, were anxious to prevent South Vietnam from being taken over by the Communists. Economic assistance and military aid were given to the South Vietnamese government. A major problem for President Kennedy lay in the unpopularity of the South Vietnamese government. He supported the overthrow of the Diem regime (though not his murder) in October 1963, and hoped that the successor government would establish an alternative to communism. It didn't work. Kennedy himself was assassinated 3 weeks later. His successor Lyndon Johnson changed the character of American policy in Vietnam by escalating the air war and increasing the number of ground forces from 21,000 in 1965, to a full fighting force of 550,000 at its peak in 1968.

The next president, Richard Nixon, adopted a new policy of "Vietnamization" of the war. Military aid to the Republic of South Vietnam was increased to ensure the defeat of the Communists. At the same time, American troops were gradually withdrawn from Vietnam. The bombing raids in the fall and winter of 1972 probably convinced the North Vietnamese to negotiate a peace settlement. In the first selection, Nixon argues that South Vietnam had defeated the Communists by the time of the cease-fire in January 1973 and that the victory was short-lived because after North Vietnam violated the accords in 1975, the United States Congress refused to give South Vietnam the aid that would have prevented its fall to the communists. Professor Larry Berman argues there was no peace and no honor. President Nixon knew the Paris Peace Accords were flawed, but once he got the prisoners of war home, when the cease-fire collapsed, he intended to bomb North Vietnam to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam until he left office.

The Vietnam Syndrome

The final chapters have yet to be written on the war in Vietnam. It was a traumatizing experience for Americans, a brutalizing experience for the Vietnamese, an exploitable opportunity for the Soviets. It was also one of the crucial battles of World War III. . . .

Vietnam was partitioned in 1954, with a communist government in the North under Ho Chi Minh and a noncommunist government in the South with its capital in Saigon. Between the two was a demilitarized buffer zone—the DMZ. Soon Ho's government in Hanoi was infiltrating large numbers of agents into the South, where they worked with guerrilla forces to set up networks of subversion and terrorism designed to undermine the Saigon government.

The interim premier of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, became its first president in 1955. He proved to be a strong and effective leader, particularly in containing the communist guerrilla forces that were directly supported by the North in violation of the 1954 Partition Agreement. The Eisenhower administration provided generous economic assistance and some military aid and technical advisers, but Eisenhower rejected proposals to commit American combat forces.

Large-scale infiltration from the North began in 1959, and by 1961 the communists had made substantial gains. Sir Robert Thompson arrived in Vietnam that year to head the British Advisory Mission. Thompson had been Secretary of Defense of the Malayan Federation when the communist insurgency had been defeated there. He and the CIA people on the scene understood the importance of local political realities in guerrilla war. In putting down the rebellion in Malaya over the course of twelve years, from 1948 to 1960, the British had learned that local, low-level aggression was best countered by local, low-level defense. Britain had used only 30,000 troops in Malaya, but had also employed 60,000 police and 250,000 in a home guard.

With the excellent advice he was getting, Diem was able to reverse the momentum of the war and put the communists on the defensive. Just as the war in Malaya had been won, the war in Vietnam was being won in the early 1960s. But then three critical events occurred that eventually turned the promise of victory into the fact of defeat.

The first took place far from Vietnam, in Cuba, in 1961: the Bay of Pigs invasion. That disastrous failure prompted President John F. Kennedy to order

a postmortem, and General Maxwell Taylor was chosen to conduct it. He concluded that the CIA was not equipped to handle large-scale paramilitary operations and decided that the American effort in Vietnam fit into this category. He therefore recommended that control of it be handed over to the Pentagon, a decision that proved to have enormous consequences. The political sophistication and on-the-spot "feel" for local conditions that the CIA possessed went out the window, as people who saw the world through technological lenses took over the main operational responsibility for the war.

Another key turning point came the next year, in 1962, in Laos. At a press conference two months after his inauguration Kennedy had correctly declared that a communist attempt to take over Laos "quite obviously affects the security of the United States." He also said, "We will not be provoked, trapped, or drawn into this or any other situation; but I know that every American will want his country to honor its obligations." At the Geneva Conference in July 1962 fifteen countries signed an agreement in which those with military forces in Laos pledged to withdraw them and all agreed to stop any paramilitary assistance. All the countries complied except one: North Vietnam. North Vietnam never took any serious steps to remove its 7,000-man contingent from Laos—only 40 men were recorded as leaving—and the United States was therefore eventually forced to resume covert aid to Laos to prevent the North Vietnamese from taking over the country.

North Vietnam's obstinacy in keeping its forces in Laos—which had increased to 70,000 by 1972—created an extremely difficult situation for the South Vietnamese. The communists used the sparsely inhabited highlands of eastern Laos, and also of Cambodia, as a route for supplying their forces in South Vietnam. These areas also gave them a privileged sanctuary from which to strike, enabling them to concentrate overwhelmingly superior forces against a single local target and then slip back across the border before reinforcements could be brought in. The "Ho Chi Minh Trail" through Laos enabled the communists to do an end run around the demilitarized zone between North and South and to strike where the defenders were least prepared.

If South Vietnam had only had to contend with invasion and infiltration from the North across the forty-mile-long DMZ, it could have done so without the assistance of American forces. In the Korean War the enemy had had to attack directly across the border; North Korea could hardly use the ocean on either side of South Korea as a "privileged sanctuary" from which to launch attacks. But Hanoi was able to use sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia as staging grounds for its assault on South Vietnam. In addition to making hit-and-run tactics possible, these lengthened the border the South had to defend from 40 to 640 miles, not counting indentations. Along these 640 miles there were few natural boundaries. The North Vietnamese were free to pick and choose their points of attack, always waiting until they had an overwhelming local advantage, in accordance with the strategy of guerrilla warfare. Our failure to prevent North Vietnam from establishing the Ho Chi Minh Trail along Laos' eastern border in 1962 had an enormous effect on the subsequent events in the war.

The third key event that set the course of the war was the assassination of Diem. Diem was a strong leader whose nationalist credentials were as solid

as Ho Chi Minh's. He faced the difficult task of forging a nation while waging a war. In the manner of postcolonial leaders, he ran a regime that drew its inspiration partly from European parliamentary models, partly from traditional Asian models, and partly from necessity. It worked for Vietnam, but it offended American purists, those who inspect the world with white gloves and disdain association with any but the spotless. Unfortunately for Diem, the American press corps in Vietnam wore white gloves, and although the North was not open to their inspection, the South was. Diem himself had premonitions of the fatal difference this might make when he told Sir Robert Thompson in 1962, "Only the American press can lose this war."

South Vietnam under Diem was substantially free, but, by American standards, not completely free. Responsible reporting seeks to keep events in proportion. The mark of irresponsible reporting is that it blows them out of proportion. It achieves drama by exaggeration, and its purpose is not truth but drama. The shortcomings of Diem's regime, like other aspects of the war, were blown grossly out of proportion.

"The camera," it has been pointed out, "has a more limited view even than the cameraman and argues always from the particular to the general." On June 11, 1963, the camera provided a very narrow view for the television audience in the United States. On that day, in a ritual carefully arranged for the camera, a Buddhist monk in South Vietnam doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire. That picture, selectively chosen, seared a single word into the minds of many Americans: repression. The camera's focus on this one monk's act of self-immolation did not reveal the larger reality of South Vietnam; it obscured it. Even more thoroughly obscured from the television audience's view were the conditions inside North Vietnam, where unfriendly newsmen were not allowed.

Recently, in the Soviet Union, a Crimean Tartar set himself on fire to protest the thirty-five-year exile of his people from their ancestral homeland. A picture of this did not make the network news; it did not even make the front pages; I saw a story about it, with no pictures, buried on page twenty-one of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Communist regimes bury their mistakes; we advertise ours. During the war in Vietnam a lot of well-intentioned Americans got taken in by our well-advertised mistakes.

Some Buddhist temples in Vietnam were, in effect, headquarters of political opposition, and some Buddhist sects were more political than religious. The fact that Diem was a devout Catholic made him an ideal candidate to be painted as a repressor of Buddhists. They also played very skillful political theater; the "burning Buddhist" incident was an especially grisly form. But the press played up the Buddhists as oppressed holy people, and the world placed the blame on their target, Diem. The press has a way of focusing on one aspect of a complex situation as "the" story; in Vietnam in 1963 "the" story was "repression."

President Kennedy grew increasingly, unhappy at being allied with what was being portrayed as a brutal, oppressive government. Apparently without seriously considering the long-term consequences, the United States began putting some distance between itself and Diem.

On November 1, 1963, Diem was overthrown in a coup and assassinated. Charges that the U.S. government was directly involved may be untrue and unfair. However, the most charitable interpretation of the Kennedy administration's part in this affair is that it greased the skids for Diem's downfall and did nothing to prevent his murder. It was a sordid episode in American foreign policy. Diem's fall was followed by political instability and chaos in South Vietnam, and the event had repercussions all over Asia as well. President Ayub Khan of Pakistan told me a few months later, "Diem's murder meant three things to many Asian leaders: that it is dangerous to be a friend of the United States; that it pays to be neutral; and that sometimes it helps to be an enemy."

The months of pressure and intrigue preceding the coup had paralyzed the Diem administration and allowed the communists to gain the initiative in the war. Once Diem was disposed of, the gates of the Presidential Palace became a revolving door. Whatever his faults, Diem had represented "legitimacy." With the symbol of legitimacy gone, power in South Vietnam was up for grabs. Coup followed coup for the next two years until Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky took over in 1965. The guerrilla forces had taken advantage of this chaotic situation and gained a great deal of strength in the interim.

President Kennedy had sent 16,000 American troops to Vietnam to serve as combat "advisers" to the regular South Vietnam units, but after Diem's assassination the situation continued to deteriorate. In 1964 Hanoi sent in troops in order to be in a position to take over power when the government of South Vietnam fell. By 1965 South Vietnam was on the verge of collapse. In order to prevent the conquest by the North, President Johnson, in February started bombing of the North, and in March the first independent American combat units landed in Danang. As our involvement deepened, reaching a level of 550,000 troops by the time Johnson left office, fatal flaws in the American approach became manifest.

In World War II we won basically by out producing the other side. We built more and better weapons, and we were able to bombard the enemy with so many of them that he was forced to give up. Overwhelming firepower, unparalleled logistical capabilities, and the massive military operations that our talent for organization made possible were the keys to our success. But in World War II we were fighting a conventional war against a conventional enemy. We also were fighting a total war, and therefore, like the enemy, we had no qualms about the carnage we caused. Even before Hiroshima an estimated 35,000 people were killed in the Allied firebombing of Dresden; more than 80,000 perished in the two-day incendiary bombing of Tokyo a month later.

Vietnam, like Korea, was a limited war. The United States plunged in too impulsively in the 1960s, and then behaved too indecisively. We tried to wage a conventional war against an enemy who was fighting an unconventional war. We tried to mold the South Vietnamese Army into a large-scale conventional force while the principal threat was still from guerrilla forces, which called for the sort of smaller-unit, local-force response that had proved so successful in Malaya. American military policy-makers tended to downplay the subtler political and psychological aspects of guerrilla war, trying instead to win by throwing massive quantities of men and arms at the objective. And then, the

impact even of this was diluted by increasing American pressure gradually rather than suddenly, thus giving the enemy time to adapt. Eisenhower, who refrained from publicly criticizing the conduct of the war, privately fumed about the gradualism. He once commented to me: "If the enemy holds a hill with a battalion, give me two battalions and I'll take it, but at great cost in casualties. Give me a division and I'll take it without a fight."

In Vietnam during that period we were not subtle enough in waging the guerrilla war; were too subtle in waging the conventional war. We were too patronizing, even contemptuous, toward our ally, and too solicitous of our enemy. Vietnamese morale was sapped by "Americanization" of the war; American morale was sapped by perpetuation of the war.

Democracies are not well equipped to fight prolonged wars. A democracy fights well after its morale is galvanized by an enemy attack and it gears up its war production. A totalitarian power can coerce its population into fighting indefinitely. But a democracy fights well only as long as public opinion supports the war, and public opinion will not continue to support a war that drags on without tangible signs of progress. This is doubly true when the war is being fought half a world away. Twenty-five years ago the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu wrote, "There has never been a protracted war from which a country had benefited. . . . What is essential in war," he went on, "is victory not prolonged operations." Victory was what the American people were not getting.

We Americans are a do-it-yourself people. During that period we failed to understand that we could not win the war for the South Vietnamese: that, in the final analysis, the South Vietnamese would have to win it for themselves. The United States bulldozed its way into Vietnam and tried to run the war our way instead of recognizing that our mission should have been to help the South Vietnamese build up their forces so that they could win the war.

When I was talking with an Asian leader before I became President, he graphically pointed out the weakness in what was then the American policy toward South Vietnam: "When you are trying to assist another nation in defending its freedom, U.S. policy should be to help them fight the war but not to fight it for them." This was exactly where we had been going wrong in Vietnam. As South Vietnam's Vice President Ky later said, "You captured our war."

When I took office in 1969 it was obvious the American strategy in Vietnam needed drastic revision. My administration was committed to formulating a strategy that would end American involvement in the war and enable South Vietnam to win.

Our goals were to:

- Reverse the "Americanization" of the war that had occurred from 1965 to 1968 and concentrate instead on Vietnamization.
- Give more priority to pacification so that the South Vietnamese could be better able to extend their control over the countryside.
- Reduce the invasion threat by destroying enemy sanctuaries and supply lines in Cambodia and Laos.
- Withdraw the half million American troops from Vietnam in a way that would not bring about a collapse in the South.

- Negotiate a cease-fire and a peace treaty.
- Demonstrate our willingness and determination to stand by our ally if the peace agreement was violated by Hanoi, and assure South Vietnam that it would continue to receive our military aid as Hanoi did from its allies, the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, China.

En route to Vietnam for my first visit as President, I held a press conference in Guam on July 25, 1969, at which I enunciated what has become known as the Nixon Doctrine. At the heart of the Nixon Doctrine is the premise that countries threatened by communist aggression must take the primary responsibility for their own defense. This does not mean that U.S. forces have no military role; what it does mean is that threatened countries have to be willing to bear the primary burden of supplying the manpower. We were already putting the Nixon Doctrine into effect in Vietnam by concentrating on Vietnamization. This meant, as Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird put it, helping South Vietnam develop "a stronger administration, a stronger economy, stronger military forces and stronger police for internal security."

The most important aspect of Vietnamization was the development of South Vietnam's army into a strong, independent fighting force capable of holding its own against the communists—both the guerrilla forces and the main-force units from the north that were then waging conventional war.

In October 1969 I sent Sir Robert Thompson to Vietnam as my special adviser, with instructions to give me a candid, first-hand, independent evaluation of the situation. He reported that he was able to walk safely through many villages that had been under Vietcong control for years. He was so impressed with the progress that had been made that he thought we were in "a winning position" to conclude a just peace if we were willing to follow through with the efforts we were making.

After giving sharply increased emphasis to Vietnamization and pacification, the first order of military business was to hit at the enemy sanctuaries and supply lines in Laos and Cambodia. . . .

Cambodia

In March 1969, in response to a major new offensive that the North Vietnamese had launched against our forces in South Vietnam, I ordered the bombing of enemy-occupied base areas in Cambodia. The bombing was not publicly announced because of our concern that if it were, Sihanouk would be forced to object to it. However, even after it was disclosed by leaks to the *New York Times* in April, Sihanouk did not object. On the contrary, in May 1969, two months after the bombing had started, he said, "Cambodia only protests against the destruction of the property and lives of Cambodians. . . . If there is a buffalo or any Cambodian killed, I will be informed immediately . . . (and) I will protest."

In June 1969, Sihanouk said at a press conference that one of Cambodia's northeast provinces was "practically North Vietnamese territory," and the next month he invited me to visit Cambodia to mark the improvement of relations between our two countries. But Sihanouk's tilt toward the United States

did not satisfy Cambodian public opinion. The Cambodians strongly objected to North Vietnam's violation of their sovereignty. In a series of rapidly moving events in March 1970, demonstrations against North Vietnamese occupation of Cambodian territory led to the sacking of the North Vietnamese and Vietcong embassies in Phnom Penh. Within a matter of days the North Vietnamese were given forty-eight hours' notice to vacate the country. Tiring of Sihanouk's careful balancing act, the Cambodian Parliament voted unanimously to depose him. . . .

Throughout April we showed restraint while the Vietnamese communist forces ran rampant through Cambodia. Our total military aid delivered to Cambodia consisted of 3,000 rifles provided covertly. The communists did not show similar restraint; they made it clear that their sole objective was domination of Cambodia.

Finally, on April 30, I announced our decision to counter the communist offensive by attacking North Vietnamese-occupied base areas in Cambodia bordering on South Vietnam. Our principal purpose was to undercut the North Vietnamese invasion of that country so that Vietnamization and plans for the withdrawal of American troops could continue in South Vietnam. A secondary purpose was to relieve the military pressure exerted on Cambodia by the North Vietnamese forces that were rapidly overrunning it. The North Vietnamese had been occupying parts of eastern Cambodia for over five years and returned there after we left; in contrast we limited our stay to two months and advanced only to a depth of twenty-one miles. It is obvious to any unbiased observer who the aggressor was. . . .

The joint operations by the U.S. Army and ARVN wiped out huge stores of North Vietnamese equipment—15 million rounds of ammunition (a full year's supply), 14 million pounds of rice (four months' supply), 23,000 weapons (enough for seventy-four full-strength North Vietnamese battalions), and much more.

Thanks to this and the following year's Lam Son operation in Laos by the South Vietnamese forces, Hanoi was unable to stockpile enough supplies for a full-scale attack on South Vietnam until two years later—in 1972. Valuable time had been won with which to complete the task of Vietnamization. And even when the 1972 offensive came, it was weakest and easiest to contain from the direction of the sanctuaries in Cambodia, a testimony to the effectiveness of our measures. . . .

The 1972 Invasion

The American and South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971 successfully prevented major North Vietnamese and Vietcong offensives in South Vietnam during those years and made it possible for the United States to continue to withdraw its forces on schedule.

By the spring of 1972 Hanoi recognized that it could not conquer South Vietnam through guerrilla war tactics, even with the help of conventional units, and that it could not win the support of the South Vietnamese people. There was no creditable way for Hanoi to claim any longer that the war in the South was a

civil war between the Saigon government and the Vietcong, so North Vietnam dropped the facade of "civil war" and launched a full-scale conventional invasion of the South. Fourteen divisions and twenty-six independent regiments invaded the South. This left only one division and four independent regiments in Laos and no regular ground forces at all in North Vietnam.

As Sir Robert Thompson put it, "It was a sign of the times that this Korean-type communist invasion, which twenty years before would have prompted united Western action and ten years before a Kennedy crusade, immediately put in doubt American resolve and probably won the Wisconsin primary for Senator George McGovern."

U.S. mining of Haiphong Harbor and the use of our airpower against targets in North Vietnam helped save the day, but the fighting on the ground was done exclusively by South Vietnamese forces. North Vietnam lost an estimated 130,000, killed and disabled. The invasion was a failure. . . .

[Our] actions in 1972 strengthened rather than weakened our new relationship with the Soviets and the Chinese. They both could see that we had power, the will to use it, and the skill to use it effectively. This meant that we were worth talking to. We could be a reliable friend or a dangerous enemy. This did not mean that they could publicly abandon their communist allies in Hanoi. However, their support for Hanoi noticeably cooled, which increased the incentive for Hanoi's leaders to make a peace agreement.

As a result of their decisive defeat in the 1972 offensive and their growing concern about the reliability of their Soviet and Chinese allies, the North Vietnamese finally began to negotiate seriously. But they were as stubborn at the conference table as they were on the battlefield. They wanted victory more than they wanted peace. Despite the overwhelming defeat of the peace-at-any-price candidate in the U.S. November elections, they continued to balk at our minimum terms.

On December 14 I made the decision to renew and increase the bombing of military targets in North Vietnam. The bombing began on December 18. It was a necessary step, and it proved to be the right decision. Although it was a very difficult choice, the realities of war, and not the wishful thinking of the ill-informed, demanded this action. The bombing broke the deadlock in negotiations. The North Vietnamese returned to the negotiating table, and on January 23, 1973, the long-awaited peace agreement was finally achieved.

After their decisive defeat on the ground by South Vietnamese forces in the spring offensive and the destruction of their war-making capabilities by the December bombing, the North Vietnamese knew that militarily they were up against almost impossible odds. As the South Vietnamese economy continued to prosper far more than that of the North, Hanoi's communist ideology had less and less appeal. Thieu's Land to the Tiller program, for example, had reduced tenancy from 60 to 7 percent by 1973, a truly revolutionary development that undercut the communists' argument that the government allied itself with the rich and oppressed the people. Also, the North Vietnamese knew that both the Soviets and the Chinese had a stake in their new relationship with us and might not be willing to endanger that relationship by providing military supplies in excess of those allowed by the Paris peace agreement of January 1973.

From Victory to Defeat

We had won the war militarily and politically in Vietnam. But defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory because we lost the war politically in the United States. The peace that was finally won in January 1973 could have been enforced and South Vietnam could be a free nation today. But in a spasm of shortsightedness and spite, the United States threw away what it had gained at such enormous cost. . . .

On January 2, 1973, the House Democratic Caucus voted 154-75 to cut off all funds for Indochina military operations as soon as arrangements were made for the safe withdrawal of U.S. troops and the return of our prisoners of war. Two days later a similar resolution was passed by the Senate Democratic Caucus, 36-12. This, it should be noted, was before Watergate began to weaken my own position as President, and only three months before withdrawal of American forces was completed, and the last of the 550,000 American troops that were in Vietnam when I took office in 1969 were brought back. . . .

If the peace agreement was to have any chance to be effective, it was essential that Hanoi be deterred from breaking it. In a private letter to Thieu I had stated that "if Hanoi fails to abide by the terms of this agreement, it is my intention to take swift and severe retaliatory action." At a news conference on March 15, with regard to North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam and violation of the agreement, I stated, "I would only suggest that based on my actions over the past four years, the North Vietnamese should not lightly disregard such expressions of concern, when they are made with regard to a violation."

In April, May, and June of 1973, with my authority weakened by the Watergate crisis, retaliatory action was threatened but not taken. Then Congress passed a bill setting August 15 as the date for termination of U.S. bombing in Cambodia and requiring congressional approval for the funding of U.S. military action in any part of Indochina. The effect of this bill was to deny the President the means to enforce the Vietnam peace agreement by retaliating against Hanoi for violations.

Once Congress had removed the possibility of military action against breaches of the peace agreement, I knew I had only words with which to threaten. The communists knew it too. By means of the bombing cutoff and the War Powers resolution passed in November 1973, Congress denied to me and to my successor, President Ford, the means with which to enforce the Paris agreement at a time when the North Vietnamese were openly and flagrantly violating it. It is truly remarkable that, for two years after the signing of the peace agreement in January 1973, the South Vietnamese held their own against the well-supplied North, without American personnel support either in the air or on the ground and with dwindling supplies.

Throughout 1974 the Russians poured huge amounts of ammunition, weaponry, and military supplies into North Vietnam, and the North in turn poured them into the South. In March 1974 Hanoi was estimated to have 185,000 men, 500 to 700 tanks, and 24 regiments of antiaircraft troops in the South. With the threat of American air power gone, the North Vietnamese built

new roads and pipelines to move their armies and supplies about. At the same time, that the Soviet Union was arming Hanoi for the final assault, the United States Congress was sharply curtailing the flow of aid to South Vietnam. U.S. aid to South Vietnam was halved in 1974 and cut by another third in 1975. The United States ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, warned the Senate foreign Relations Committee that such cuts in military aid would "seriously tempt the North to gamble on an all-out military offensive." His warning was tragically prophetic.

The original plan of the North Vietnamese was to launch their final offensive in 1976. But then they stepped up their timetable. At the start of 1975 Phuoc Long province fell to the communists, the first province South Vietnam had lost completely since 1954. There was relatively little reaction in the United States. Hanoi decided to make larger attacks in 1975 in preparation for the final offensive in 1976. On March 11, Ban Me Thout fell, and on the same day the U.S. House of Representatives refused to fund a \$300 million supplemental military aid package that President Ford had proposed. Together with the earlier cut-back of aid, this had a devastating effect on the morale of the South Vietnamese, as well as denying them the means with which to defend themselves; they were desperately short of military supplies and dependent for them on the United States. It also gave a tremendous psychological boost to the North. The North threw all of its remaining troops into the battle. Thieu tried to regroup his undersupplied forces in more defensible perimeters, and the hastily executed maneuver turned into a rout. By the end of April it was all over. Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City.

Hanoi had suffered an overwhelming defeat when it launched a conventional attack on the South in 1972. Then the North Vietnamese had been stopped on the ground by the South Vietnamese, while bombing by our air force and mining by our navy crippled their efforts to resupply their forces in the South. B-52 strikes could have had a devastating effect on the large troop concentrations that Hanoi used in its final offensive, but in 1975 Hanoi did not have to reckon with our air and naval forces, and thanks to ample Soviet military aid they had overwhelming advantages in tanks and artillery over South Vietnam's ground forces. After North Vietnam's victory General Dung, Hanoi's field commander in charge of the final offensive, remarked that "The reduction of U.S. aid made it impossible for the puppet troops to carry out their combat plans and build up their forces. . . . Thieu was then forced to fight a poor man's war. Enemy firepower had decreased by nearly 60 percent because of bomb and ammunition shortages. Its mobility was also reduced by half due to lack of aircraft, vehicles and fuel."

Our defeat in Vietnam can be blamed in part on the Soviets because they provided arms to Hanoi in violation of the peace agreement, giving the North an enormous advantage over the South in the final offensive in the spring of 1975. It can be blamed in part on the tactical and strategic mistakes made by President Thieu and his generals. It is grossly unfair to put the blame on South Vietnam's fighting men, the great majority of whom fought bravely and well against overwhelming odds. A major part of the blame must fall on the shoulders of those members of the Congress who were responsible for denying to

the President, first me and then President Ford, the power to enforce the peace agreements, and for refusing to provide the military aid that South Vietnamese needed in order to meet the North Vietnamese offensive on equal terms.

But Congress was in part the prisoner of events. The leaders of the United States in the crucial years of the early and mid-1960s failed to come up with a strategy that would produce victory. Instead, first they undermined a strong regime, and then simply poured more and more U.S. troops and materiel into South Vietnam in an ineffective effort to shore up the weaker regimes that followed. They misled the public by insisting we were winning the war and thereby prepared the way for defeatism and demagoguery later on. The American people could not be expected to continue indefinitely to support a war in which they were told victory was around the corner, but which required greater and greater effort without any obvious signs of improvement.

By following the strategy I initiated in 1969, we and the South Vietnamese were able to win the war militarily by the time of the Paris accords of January 27, 1973. The 550,000 American troops that were in Vietnam when I came into office in 1969 had been withdrawn and South Vietnam was able to defend itself—if we supplied the arms the Paris accords allowed.

But the public had been so misinformed and misled by unwise government actions and the shallow, inflammatory treatment of events by the media that morale within the United States collapsed just when the North was overwhelmingly defeated on the battlefield. We won a victory after a long hard struggle, but then we threw it away. The communists had grasped what strategic analyst Brian Crozier said is the central point of revolutionary war: “that it is won or lost on the home front.” The war-making capacity of North Vietnam had been virtually destroyed by the bombings in December of 1972, and we had the means to make and enforce a just peace, a peace with honor. But we were denied these means when Congress prohibited military operations in or over Indochina and cut back drastically on the aid South Vietnam needed to defend itself. In the final analysis, a major part of the blame must be borne by those who encouraged or participated in the fateful decisions that got us into the war in the 1960’s, and who then by their later actions sabotaged our efforts to get us out in an acceptable way in the 1970’s.

By inaction at the crucial moment, the United States undermined an ally and abandoned him to his fate. The effect on the millions of Cambodians, Laotians, and South Vietnamese who relied on us and have now paid the price of communist reprisals is bad enough. But the cost in terms of raising doubts among our allies as to America’s reliability, and in terms of the encouragement it gives to our potential enemies to engage in aggression against our friends in other parts of the world, will be devastating for U.S. policy for decades to come. . . .

No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam

To date, there have been two quite different explanations for the failure of the Paris Accords and the subsequent end of the country known as South Vietnam.

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger have always maintained that they won the war and that Congress lost the peace. The treaty itself, they said, although not perfect, was sound enough to have allowed for a political solution if North Vietnam had not so blatantly violated it. North and South Vietnam could have remained separate countries. When the North did violate the agreement, Watergate prevented the president from backing up his secret guarantees to President Thieu. Kissinger goes even further, insisting there was nothing secret about the promises Nixon made to Thieu. In any case, by mid-1973 Nixon was waging a constitutional battle with Congress over executive privilege and abuse of powers; he could hardly start a new battle over war powers to defend South Vietnam. "By 1973, we had achieved our political objective: South Vietnam's independence had been secured," Nixon later told Monica Crowley, former foreign policy assistant and confidante, "But by 1975, the Congress destroyed our ability to enforce the Paris agreement and left our allies vulnerable to Hanoi's invading forces. If I sound like I'm blaming Congress, I am."

Kissinger has put it this way: "Our tragedy was our domestic situation. . . .

In April [1973], Watergate blew up, and we were castrated. . . . The second tragedy was that we were not permitted to enforce the agreement. . . . I think it's reasonable to assume he [Nixon] would have bombed the hell out of them during April."

The other explanation for the failure of the Paris Accords is known as the "decent interval." This explanation is far less charitable to Nixon or Kissinger because it is premised on the assumption that by January 1973, U.S. leaders cared only about securing the release of American POWs and getting some type of accounting on MIAs, especially in Laos. The political future of South Vietnam would be left for the Vietnamese to decide; we just did not want the communists to triumph too quickly. Kissinger knew that Hanoi would eventually win. By signing the peace agreement, Hanoi was not abandoning its long-term objective, merely giving the U.S. a fig leaf with which to exit. In

his book *Decent Interval*, Frank Snepp wrote: "The Paris Agreement was thus a cop-out of sorts, an American one. The only thing it definitely guaranteed was an American withdrawal from Vietnam, for that depended on American action alone. The rest of the issues that had sparked the war and kept it alive were left essentially unresolved—and irresolvable."

Kissinger was asked by the assistant to the president, John Ehrlichman, "How long do you figure the South Vietnamese can survive under this agreement?" Ehrlichman reported that Kissinger answered, "I think that if they're lucky they can hold out for a year and a half." When Kissinger's assistant John Negroponte opined that the agreement was not in the best interests of South Vietnam, Kissinger asked him, "Do you want us to stay there forever?"

Nixon yearned to be remembered by history as a great foreign policy president; he needed a noncommunist South Vietnam on that ledger in order to sustain a legacy that already included détente with the Soviets and an opening with China. If South Vietnam was going down the tubes, it could not be on Nixon's watch. "What really matters now is how it all comes out," Nixon wrote in his diary in April 1972. "Both Haldeman and Henry seem to have an idea—which I think is mistaken—that even if we fail in Vietnam we can survive politically. I have no illusions whatsoever on that score, however. The US will not have a credible policy if we fail, and I will have to assume responsibility for that development."



No Peace, No Honor draws on recently declassified records to show that the true picture is worse than either of these perspectives suggests. The reality was the opposite of the decent interval hypothesis and far beyond Nixon's and Kissinger's claims. The record shows that the United States *expected* that the signed treaty would be immediately violated and that this would trigger a brutal military response. Permanent war (air war, not ground operations) at acceptable cost was what Nixon and Kissinger anticipated from the so-called peace agreement. They believed that the only way the American public would accept it was if there was a signed agreement. Nixon recognized that winning the peace, like the war, would be impossible to achieve, but he planned for indefinite stalemate by using the B-52s to prop up the government of South Vietnam until the end of his presidency. Just as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution provided a pretext for an American engagement in South Vietnam, the Paris Accords were intended to fulfill a similar role for remaining permanently engaged in Vietnam. Watergate derailed the plan.

The declassified record shows that the South Vietnamese, North Vietnamese, and the United States disregarded key elements of the treaty because all perceived it was in their interest to do so. No one took the agreement seriously because each party viewed it as a means for securing something unstated. For the United States, as part of the Nixon Doctrine, it was a means of remaining permanently involved in Southeast Asia; for the North Vietnamese, it was the means for eventual conquest and unification of Vietnam; for the South Vietnamese, it was a means for securing continued support from the United States.

The truth has remained buried for so long because Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger did everything possible to deny any independent access to the historical record. As witnesses to history, they used many classified top-secret documents in writing their respective memoirs but later made sure that everyone else would have great difficulty accessing the same records. They have limited access to personal papers, telephone records, and other primary source materials that would allow for any independent assessments of the record pertaining to the evolution of negotiating strategies and compromises that were raised at different stages of the protracted process. The late Admiral Elmo "Bud" Zumwalt, Jr., former chief of naval operations, said that "Kissinger's method of writing history is similar to that of communist historians who took justifications from the present moment and projected backwards, fact by fact, in accounting for their country's past. Under this method, nothing really was as it happened." This is how the administration's history of "peace with honor" was written.

The personal papers of Henry Kissinger are deposited in the Library of Congress with a deed of gift restricting access until five years after his death. For years we have been denied access to the full transcripts of Kissinger's negotiations. Verbatim hand-written transcripts of the secret meetings in Paris were kept by Kissinger's assistants, Tony Lake, Winston Lord, and John Negroponte. Negroponte gave a complete set of these meeting notes to Kissinger for writing his memoirs, but they were never returned. In his deposition to the Kerry Committee investigation, which examined virtually all aspects of the MIA issue and gave special attention to the Paris negotiations, Winston Lord stated that there were "verbatim transcripts of every meeting with the Vietnamese. I'm talking now about the secret meetings, because I took, particularly toward the beginning, and we got some help at the end, the notes as did Negroponte or Smyser or Rodman and so on." Only now have notes of these secret back-channel meetings become available. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese have published their own narrative translation of the Kissinger-Tho negotiations.

This is the story of a peace negotiation that began with Lyndon Johnson in 1968 and ended with the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. Many secret meetings were involved. The principal sources include transcript-like narratives of documents from Hanoi archives that have been translated by Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu and published as *Le Duc Tho-Kissinger Negotiations in Paris*; declassified meeting transcripts from a congressional investigation of MIAs in Southeast Asia; declassified meeting notes from the papers of Tony Lake and memoranda of conversations from recently declassified materials in the National Archives or presidential libraries. These three have been triangulated to connect minutes as well as linkages between events. In many cases, I have been able to fill in classified sections through materials in back-channel cables from Kissinger to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker or President Nixon.

Here, then, is the emerging story of what Nixon called "peace with honor" but was, in fact, neither. This story of diplomatic deception and public betrayal has come to the light only because of the release of documents and tapes that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger sought to bury for as long as possible. Prior to these declassifications, we knew only what Nixon or Kissinger wanted us to

know about the making of war and shaping of the so-called honorable peace in Vietnam. . . .



It has been over thirty years since the United States and Vietnam began talks intended to end the Vietnam War. The Paris Peace Talks began on May 13, 1968, under the crystal chandeliers in the ballroom of the old Majestic Hotel on Avenue Kleber and did not end until January 27, 1973, with the signing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam at the International Conference Center in Paris. Despite the agreement, not a moment of peace ever came to Vietnam. This book uses a cache of recently declassified documents to offer a new perspective on why the country known as South Vietnam ceased to exist after April 1975.

Since the very first days of his presidency in January 1969, Richard Nixon had sought an "honorable peace" in Vietnam. In January 1973 he characterized the Paris agreement as having achieved those lofty goals: "Now that we have achieved an honorable agreement, let us be proud that America did not settle for a peace that would have betrayed our allies, that would have abandoned our prisoners of war, or that would have ended the war for us, but would have continued the war for the 50 million people of Indochina."

A speakers' kit assembled within the White House on the evening of the president's announcement of the cease-fire described the final document as "a vindication of the wisdom of the President's policy in holding out for an honorable peace—and his refusal to accept a disguised and dishonorable defeat. Had it not been for the President's courage—during four years of unprecedented vilification and attack—the United States would not today be honorably ending her involvement in the war, but would be suffering the consequences of dishonor and defeat. . . . The difference between what the President has achieved and what his opponents wanted, is the difference between peace with honor, and the false peace of an American surrender."

A White Paper drafted for distribution to members of Congress offered more barbed attacks on his critics.

For four agonizing years, Richard Nixon has stood virtually alone in the nation's capital while little, petty men flayed him over American involvement in Indochina. For four years, he has been the victim of the most vicious personal attacks. Day and night, America's predominantly liberal national media hammered at Mr. Nixon, slicing from all sides, attacking, hitting, and cutting. The intellectual establishment—those whose writings entered America into the Vietnam war—pompously postured from their ivy hideaways, using their inordinate power to influence public opinion. . . . No President has been under more constant and unrelenting harassment by men who should drop to their knees each night to thank the Almighty that they do not have to make the same decisions that Richard Nixon did. Standing with the President in all those years were a handful of reporters and number of newspapers—nearly all outside of Washington. There were also the

courageous men of Congress who would stand firm beside the President. But most importantly there were the millions upon millions of quite ordinary Americans—the great *Silent Majority* of citizens—who saw our country through a period where the shock troops of leftist public opinion daily propagandized against the President of the United States. *They were people of character and steel.*

Meanwhile, the North Vietnam heralded the Paris agreement as a great victory. Radio Hanoi, in domestic and foreign broadcasts, confined itself for several days to reading and rereading the Paris text and protocols. From the premier's office in Hanoi came the declaration that the national flag of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) should be flown throughout the country for eight days, from the moment the cease-fire went into effect on January 28 through February 4. For three days and nights, Hanoi's streets were filled with crowds of people celebrating the fact that in 60 days there would be no foreign troops in Vietnam.

The *Nhan Dan* editorial of January 28, titled "The Great Historic Victory of Our Vietnamese People," observed, "Today, 28 January, the war has ended completely in both zones of our country. The United States and other countries have pledged to respect our country's independence, sovereignty, reunification, and territorial integrity. The United States will withdraw all U.S. troops and the troops of other foreign countries and their advisors and military personnel, dismantle U.S. military bases in the southern part of our country and respect our southern people's right to self-determination and other democratic freedoms."

Premier Pham Van Dong was more forthcoming to American broadcaster Walter Cronkite that "the Paris Agreement marked an important victory of our people in their resistance against U.S. aggression, for national salvation. For us, its terms were satisfactory. . . . The Paris agreement paved the way for our great victory in the Spring of 1975 which put an end to more than a century of colonial and neo-colonial domination over our country and restored the independence, freedom and unity of our homeland."

Perhaps the most honest response came from a young North Vietnamese cadre by the name of Man Duc Xuyen, living in Ha Bac province in North Vietnam. In a postcard, he extended Tet New Year wishes to his family. "Dear father, mother and family," the letter began. "When we have liberated South Viet-Nam and have unified the country, I will return."

Only in South Vietnam was there no joy or celebration over the signing of the Paris agreement. By the terms of the deal, over 150,000 North Vietnamese troops remained in the South, whereas the United States, over the course of Nixon's presidency, had unilaterally withdrawn over 500,000 of its own troops. President Nguyen Van Thieu and his fellow countrymen understood that the diplomatic battle had been won by Le Duc Tho. President Thieu was agreeing to nothing more than a protocol for American disengagement. True, President Nixon had guaranteed brutal retaliation if the North resumed any aggression. But could these guarantees be trusted? The fate of his country depended on them. Twenty-eight months later, South Vietnam would disappear. . . .

James Reston wrote on March 18 that, "once the withdrawal of American prisoners and troops is complete—and it will be within a few weeks—there will be an interesting legal question: what legal authority would the President then have to order American men and bombers back into battle?" The administration was quick to respond. Secretary of Defense Richardson stated that the president retained "residual authority" to bomb in order to maintain the peace and that such bombing was merely a "mopping up exercise." He provided an elaboration on this crucial point: "If he had the authority up to the moment the documents were signed, he has the authority in the following weeks to see that those agreements are lived up to."

But there would be no strikes in March after all. Nixon decided he did not want to jeopardize the return of the final group of American POWs, which finally occurred on March 29, 1973.

By April 1973 Nixon and Kissinger were again considering bombing Khe Sanh. On April 16, Bunker tried to talk Kissinger and Nixon out of it because it would "effectively destroy the cease-fire. I question whether the ICCS would survive bombing attacks in SVN or Laos. . . . Our resuming the bombing of SVN or Laos would also destroy the cease-fire in the minds of the South Vietnamese." Besides, in Bunker's view, the rainy season was about to start and there was no need to restart the bombing in South Vietnam. "In fact, the communists may regard this infiltration effort as compensating for our Enhance and Enhance Plus."

On April 17, Bunker backed off a bit: "I have no problem with 'massive strikes' in Laos and Cambodia. . . . I question the effectiveness of bombing the Trail in Laos and the advisability of bombing either the Trail or Khe Sanh before your meeting with Le Duc Tho." (Kissinger was scheduled to meet again with Le Duc Tho in order to hammer out problems in the agreement.) Kissinger cabled right back with his long-held belief that "it is our judgment that the North Vietnamese will break the cease-fire whenever and however it suits their purpose. They need no provocation. We are therefore considering massive strikes in Laos [to] leave no doubt as to their chances of getting away with flagrant disregard of the agreements."



Five days before he had been sworn in for his second term as the nation's thirty-seventh president, Nixon had written in his diary, "It is ironic that the day the news came out stopping the bombing of North Vietnam, the Watergate Four plead guilty." Unbeknown to anyone, as Henry Kissinger was negotiating with Le Duc Tho in Paris, "Watergate was changing from amber to red," recalled Admiral Zumwalt. "The private commitments made by Nixon to Thieu were unraveling alongside Nixon's presidency."

More than a private commitment was at stake; a secret plan was being overtaken by events. By April 30, Nixon had told the country that he accepted responsibility for the Watergate incident, but he also denied any personal involvement in either the break-in or cover-up. He said that he had been misled by subordinates who had made an "effort to conceal the facts." Nixon announced the

nomination of Elliot Richardson as attorney general and that Richardson would have authority to appoint a special prosecutor. The White House also announced that the president had accepted the resignations of Ehrlichman, Haldeman, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, and the president's counsel, John Dean. As Kissinger later told Stanley Karnow, "After June 1973 I did not believe that the cease-fire would hold. I certainly did not after July 1973. Watergate was in full strength. We had intelligence documents from North Vietnam decoded that Nixon could not honor his pledge and do what he had done in 1972 because of domestic situations."

Watergate would have another effect. Kissinger later stated that this was a "different Nixon. He approached the problems of the violations in a curiously desultory fashion. He drifted. He did not hone in on the decision in the single-minded, almost possessed manner that was his hallmark. The rhetoric might be there, but accompanied this time with excuses for inaction. In retrospect, we know that by March, Watergate was boiling."

There is no question now, nor was there then, that Watergate sapped any resolve that Nixon may have had to bomb again. For decades, Henry Kissinger has used that fact to justify his argument that the administration—including himself—never intended to abandon South Vietnam. Yet something is hard to swallow in that argument. Nixon, the die-hard anticommunist, may have convinced himself that the American people would support South Vietnam in the face of the new—and newly illegal—Northern aggression no matter what. But most Americans were weary of the war, and the public no longer held the same zeal for anticommunism that it had had in the late 1940s and 1950s.

Could Kissinger, the realist, the pragmatist, have failed to see this? Indeed, two newly released records of conversations at meetings suggest a more devious plan. The first, a meeting with Lee Quan Yew, prime minister of Singapore, on August 4, 1973, reveals, in Kissinger's own words, the belief that bombing was the only way to make certain that the South would not fall.

The secret meeting occurred in the Captain's Conference Room of the New York Port Authority Policy Building at Kennedy Airport. The euphoria of January's peace with honor was now a distant memory. Lee had just returned from meeting Nha.

Kissinger told Lee that "[Nha] dislikes me intensely!"

"That is not important—personal likes and dislikes. The important thing is the job to be done. I told him it would be useful if Thieu met me. He said, 'why not just meet me?'"

"What is your impression of Nha?" asked Kissinger.

"He is bright, ambitious. With full confidence that what he says will carry weight with the President," said Lee.

"That is true. He is also immature. Emotional," concluded Kissinger.

But Kissinger had come to talk about Watergate and Vietnam, not Mr. Nha. "Our objectives are still the same. We have suffered a tragedy because of Watergate. . . . We were going to bomb North Vietnam for a week, then go to Russia, then meet with Le Duc Tho. Congress has made it impossible." Then Kissinger made the tell-tale confession of his dashed hopes: "In May

and June I drew the conclusion that the North Vietnamese were resigning themselves to a long pull of 5-to-6 years. . . . And it would have been a certainty if we had given them one blow." In other words, a little bombing now might have slowed them down, which would be a decent interval before losing the South. Nixon and Kissinger would not be directly tied to it.

One more blow was a far more realistic expectation on Kissinger's part. Kissinger told Lee that "the last three months were the most difficult period for us. We couldn't say anything because we could never be sure what some junior aide would say next. But as soon as the hearings are over, we will go on the counter-offensive. We are already in the process. While we are in these difficulties, we have to stay cool. But we won't give up our foreign policy. We will regain the initiative. In Southeast Asia, we haven't gone through all this for four years to abandon it. Sixty-one percent voted in November 1972 not to abandon Southeast Asia. It was a clear issue."

The meeting ended with Lee Kuan Yew's saying how important it was that South Vietnam survive through 1976. "My concern is to have it last through 1976 so that you will have a strong President. If it falls, you will have a new President who says, 'that's what tore American society apart.'"

Kissinger must have been reassured, because he told Lee, "You are an asset to us in that part of the world and we have no interest in destroying you. We won't leave any documents around. They stay in my office."

A little more than a month later, on September 26, Kissinger met with Nguyen Phu Duc in the Waldorf Towers in New York. Kissinger was now secretary of state, and Duc asked Kissinger what the United States planned to do with respect to the North's violations of the Paris Accord. "If it were not for domestic difficulties, we would have bombed them. This is now impossible. Your brothers in the North only understand brutality," said Kissinger. The secretary then spoke about how the Congress had acted "irresponsibly" by cutting off support for bombing, but North Vietnamese "suspiciousness is playing into our hands. They don't completely understand the restrictions placed on us by Congress. President Nixon has fooled them so often that they are probably more concerned that you believe. It is important that you show confidence and behave strongly." He ended with a joke: "Treat them like you treat me."

The conversation then got much more revealing. Kissinger made a startling admission: "I came away from the January negotiations with the feeling that we would have to bomb the North Vietnamese again in early April or May." He did not say, "If the North violated the accord, we would bomb." He confirmed what Haig had told Phouma, what Nixon had said to Thieu and what Zumwalt had concluded in November 1972 at the JCS meeting: it was a sham peace held together with a plan to deceive the American public with the rhetoric of American honor. He knew the North would cheat and was planning on resuming the bombing.

As Kissinger toasted Le Duc Tho with words of peace in January 1973, and as Richard Nixon addressed the nation with news of an honorable peace in Vietnam, both men knew that as soon as the last American POW was home, the bombing would be renewed. For Nixon, the bombing would continue

right through 1976, and for Kissinger, just long enough to pick up his Nobel Peace Prize.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 27, 1975, William Buckley noted that Watergate had derailed the president's plan to pulverize Hanoi and that Nixon at the time was too emotionally unstable to renew the bombing: "What would Nixon, under Kissinger's prodding, have done, if his reactions had been healthy, when only a few weeks after the Paris Accord was executed, North Vietnam began its blatant disregard of it. My own information is that it was planned, sometime in April, to pulverize Hanoi and Haiphong," wrote Buckley. Indeed, the plans were made even earlier.

One final question remains: Would even short-term bombing support for the South have been accepted by the public? In interviewing done on the day of the Vietnam agreement, a Gallup Poll asked the following questions:

- "When United States troops are withdrawn from Vietnam, do you think a strong enough government can be maintained in South Vietnam to withstand Communist political pressure, or not?" Fifty-four percent believed that government in the South would not survive; 27 percent believed South Vietnam would last; 19 percent had no opinion.
- "After United States troops are withdrawn from Vietnam, do you think North Vietnam in the next few years is likely to try to take over South Vietnam again, or not?" Seventy percent thought that the North would try to take over the South, 16 percent thought no, and 14 percent had no opinion.
- "Suppose when the United States troops are withdrawn, North Vietnam does try to take over South Vietnam again, do you think the United States should send war materials to South Vietnam, or not?" Fifty percent believed the U.S. should not send war materials, while 38 percent said yes, and 12 percent had no opinion.
- "If North Vietnam does try to take over South Vietnam again, do you think the United States should bomb North Vietnam, or not?" Seventy-one percent said no to bombing, while 17 percent said yes, and 12 percent had no opinion.
- "If North Vietnam does try to take over South Vietnam again, do you think the United States should send troops to help South Vietnam, or not?" Seventy-nine percent were opposed to sending troops, while 13 percent favored such an action, and 8 percent had no opinion.

Kissinger later acknowledged that he had misjudged the willingness of the American people to defend the agreement. "But I admit this: we judged wrong. And what we judged wrong above all was our belief that if we could get peace with honor, that we would unite the American people who would then defend an agreement that had been achieved with so much pain. That was our fundamental miscalculation. It never occurred to me, and I'm sure it never occurred to President Nixon, that there could be any doubt about it, because

an agreement that you don't enforce is a surrender; it's just writing down surrender terms."

Twenty-five Years Later

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Paris agreement, the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C., convened a conference, "The Paris Agreement on Vietnam: 25 Years Later." Noticeable by their absence were those who in the intervening years had questioned "peace with honor." Kissinger attended and spoke about the many letters and private assurances given by Nixon to Thieu in which he promised to enforce the agreement: "I would simply ask some honest researcher sometime to compare the letters that President Nixon wrote to Thieu with the letters that still have not been published that President Kennedy or Johnson wrote to other leaders to see who made the bigger commitments. Or even other Presidents, in other circumstances. These were never treated as national commitments. These were expressions of the intentions of the President. Every senior member of the administration—including myself, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of State—is represented in compendiums of statements that said publicly every week that we intended to enforce the agreement. There was nothing new about that. . . . If I had any idea that all this was possible, I would not have participated in, and President Nixon would never have authorized, any sort of agreement. I believe it could otherwise have been maintained for a long enough period of time to give the South Vietnamese an opportunity, as the South Koreans were given, to develop their own future."

With respect to consultations with President Thieu, Kissinger's position remained unchanged: "There were all kinds of proposals that we made during that period—the last one made publicly in January 1972 by President Nixon when he disclosed the secret talks which had been going on, and which had been preceded by a secret proposal in May 1971 (all of which, incidentally, President Thieu, approved, probably thinking they would never be accepted). It was not as if we just slipped a proposal to the North Vietnamese that the South Vietnamese had never seen. In fact, I believe that Al Haig took every proposal to Saigon before we made it, and that was approved—although I will admit that the speed with which we moved at the end undoubtedly surprised the South Vietnamese."

The records that Kissinger and Nixon chose to omit from their respective memoirs offer a far more devious explanation. Hoang Duc Nha once employed a Vietnamese proverb to describe his dealings with Kissinger, translated as, "We are like frogs looking up from the darkness at the bottom of the well," meaning that the Vietnamese were in the dark about Kissinger's motives and intentions. Ever today, almost three decades since the Paris Accords were signed, Kissinger would prefer that we all remain, like the South Vietnamese, in the dark.

POSTSCRIPT



Did President Nixon Negotiate a “Peace with Honor” in Vietnam in 1973?

President Nixon presents his own version of the Vietnam fiasco. His contention is that despite policy failure by the prior president, the Nixon administration stemmed the tide. When the last United States troops were withdrawn and the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973 between the two Vietnams, the South Vietnamese had achieved military victory. Although the victory was short-lived, Nixon argues that South Vietnam would have been saved except that the United States Congress, under the influence of the anti-war protestors and the liberal press, refused to send aid or support to any United States bombing missions.

Both Nixon and Kissinger have tried to control their tapes and papers in giving their own accounts of the Nixon presidency. In addition to *The Real War*, see the former president's *No More Vietnams* (Arbor House, 1985); and his autobiography *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (Warner Books, 1978). Kissinger has condensed his two volumes of memoirs pertaining to Vietnam in *Ending the Vietnam War* (Simon and Schuster, 2003); condensed even further in his history of *Diplomacy* (Simon and Schuster, 1994). While both men argue that South Vietnam could have been saved, they give different accounts of the peace negotiations leading to the withdrawal of American troops in the winter of 1973. The rivalry between the two is fully explored in Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (Harper Collins, 2007).

In the second reading, Larry Berman, professor of history at the University of California, Davis, has challenged the Nixon-Kissinger version of the ending of the Vietnam War. Through a careful use of declassified notes of key presidential advisers, that are located in the National Archives or Presidential libraries as well as translations of transcript-like narratives of documents from the Hanoi archives, Berman describes a story of “diplomatic deception and public betrayal” regarding the Paris Peace Accords supposedly ending the Vietnam War in January 1973.

Berman accepts the “decent interval” interpretation first advanced by CIA agent Frank Snepp in a book of the same title published in 1973. Both Kissinger and Nixon realized that once American troops were withdrawn, both sides would violate the cease-fire agreements and South Vietnam would lose the war within 2 years. Berman, however, adds a new twist to this view. Both Nixon and Kissinger knew that the South Vietnamese government was doomed to fail. But Nixon expected to resume bombing the North Vietnamese military to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam until after the president left

office in 1977. But Congress refused to resume the bombing in the spring of 1973, and the president became embroiled in the Watergate scandal. Nixon resigned in August 1974, and the South Vietnamese government collapsed on April 30, 1975. The new president, Gerald Ford, had been unable to get Congress to send bombs, troops, or increased aid to South Vietnam.

The Vietnam War remains controversial both among historians and policy makers. President Nixon's interpretation gets support from Lewis Sorley, a third-generation graduate from West Point, a Ph.D. holder from Johns Hopkins, and a former CIA agent. *A Better War, the Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999), argues that Nixon's policy makers and, in particular General Creighton Abrams, "dropped General Westmoreland's war of attrition and search-and-destroy missions in favor of a holistic approach aimed at 'pacifying' the population of South Vietnam." (Jeff T. Hay, *The Greenhaven Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, Greenhaven Press, 2004.) Militarily, the war was won, says Sorley, but Congress and a politically weakened Nixon negotiated a one-sided peace to ensure defeat for South Vietnam. Another military historian and former Vietnam War military commander, James H. Willbanks, supports some of Sorley's interpretation. *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost Its War* (University Press of Kansas, 2004) argues that the South Vietnamese, with the aid of United States advisers and air power, held off the North Vietnamese military advances in 1972. But the Paris Peace Accords, negotiated by a politically weakened Nixon along with corrupt South Vietnamese political leaders and incompetent senior military leadership caused the demise of South Vietnam.

Professor Berman's interpretation is also challenged by Jeffrey Kimball who has written a comprehensive and detailed interpretation of *Nixon's Vietnam War* (University Press of Kansas, 1998). In his article for *The SHAFR Newsletter* (September 2001) "The Case of the 'Decent Interval': Do We Now Have a Smoking Gun?", Kimball feels that Berman misinterpreted some of his evidence. The "decent interval" was adopted in the fall of 1970 after his initial plan for a quick victory and withdrawal had failed and not in 1973 at the Paris Peace Talks as Berman claims.

Perhaps we will have a better assessment of Nixon's policies when all of his tapes along with Kissinger's correspondence are placed in the National Archives or the Nixon Presidential library.

The Vietnam War remains politically controversial. In the 2004 election, President George Bush had to prove he served in the Alabama National Guard during the war, while Senator John Kerry had to defend his patriotism as a former leader of the Vietnam Veterans against the War. In the summer of 2009, President Obama was weighing his options in Afghanistan. Should he send troops there? Republicans were reading Lewis Sorley's book for lessons on how to win while Democrats, including Obama, were reading Gordon M. Goldstein's *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam* (Henry Holt and Co., 2008). Bundy was head of the National Security Council under both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson who, like former Secretary of Defense Robert F. McNamara, had second thoughts about escalating the war in 1965. See "A Battle of Two Books Rages," *The Wall Street Journal* (October 7, 2009).

There are thousands of books on the Vietnam War. The two best overviews are George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 3rd ed. (McGraw Hill, 1996); and David L. Anderson, ed., *Shadows on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945–1975* (University Press of Kansas, 1993), which provide historical essays on the role of every President from Truman through Ford as regards to the Vietnam War.

Professor John Milton Cooper's monumental and massive *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (Knopf, 2009) is now the definitive biography of the current generation of historians. His earlier book *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Harvard University Press, 1984) presents Wilson as the realist and Theodore Roosevelt as the idealist. Cooper acknowledges his debt to the great diplomatic historian Thomas A. Bailey whose two books on *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* (The Macmillan Co., 1944) and *Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal* (The Macmillan Co., 1945) were written as guidance for President Franklin Roosevelt to avoid the mistakes that Wilson made at home and abroad in his failure to gain ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. See also Bailey's summary of the second book from "Woodrow Wilson Wouldn't Yield," in *Essays Diplomatic and Undiplomatic of Thomas A. Bailey* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969), which is also reprinted in volume 2 of the 13th edition of *Taking Sides . . . United States History*. Cooper's emphasis is different from Bailey. Where the latter wrote his books in the shadow of World War II, Cooper is responding to the emphasis placed on Wilson's psychological and physical well-being. In his last chapter of *Breaking the Heart of the World . . .*, part of which is reprinted here, Cooper believes the League fight boils down to three interlocking propositions. "First, Wilson was ahead of his time. Second, Americans were not ready after World War I to make the full-scale commitment to collective security and international enforcement that Wilson demanded. Third, it took World War II to drive home the lessons that Wilson had tried to teach."

Cooper suggests some interesting alternatives to propositions two and three. In the 1920s, the country was divided between isolationism and internationalism with the majority holding no opinions. Could President Theodore Roosevelt have moved the country toward a stronger role in international affairs if he, instead of Harding, was elected president in 1920? As regards the lessons of World War II, did the Cold War mitigate the role of the United Nations in lessening tensions between the American and Soviet blocs?

In the end, Cooper lays most of the blame for the failure of the United States to satisfy the Treaty of Versailles and enter the League of Nations on Wilson. Lodge, says Cooper, was not responsible because playing politics like reading the entire treaty to an empty Senate and adding his 14 reservations were part of the Republican party's role as the loyal opposition.

Here Cooper departs from Bailey's critique of Lodge. In the final analysis, Cooper believes Wilson failed to compromise because of his stroke. If he was in better health, Wilson might have negotiated with Lodge as he had done on passing his New Freedom bills through Congress. Wilson was a high stakes gambler, but a more physically fit president would have called in Lodge's chips.

The most recent scholarship on Wilson can be found in two collections: John Milton Cooper, Jr., ed., *Reconsidering Woodrow Wilson: Progressivism,*

Internationalism, War and Peace (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) where the editor considers Wilson "to be one of the greatest legislators to sit in the White House." See also Cooper, Jr., "Whose League of Nations? Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and World Order," in William N. Tilchin and Charles E. New, eds., *Artists of Power: Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Their Enduring Impact on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Praeger Security International, 2006). All the essays are worth reading.

The four best bibliographies of Wilson are as follows: the introduction to Lloyd E. Ambrosius's *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), which is a collection of his articles from the leading realist Wilsonian scholar. John A. Thompson, a British scholar, has an up-to-date analysis of the Wilson scholarship in *Woodrow Wilson* (Pearson Education, 2002), a short, scholarly sympathetic study in the "Profiles in Power" series designed for student use. Advanced undergraduates should consult David Steigerwald, "The Reclamation of Woodrow Wilson," *Diplomatic History* (Winter 1999). Political science majors should consult Francis J. Gavin, "The Wilsonian Legacy in the Twentieth Century," *Orbis* (Fall 1997).

