

were wrong, and rooted in a profound misreading of the adversary U.S. forces had already fought for four frustrating years. Neither the president nor his adviser had yet grasped—possibly they never did—just how intensely the Vietnamese Communists' past had led them to mistrust diplomatic arrangements. ("Never Munich again, in whatever form," North Vietnam's Pham Van Dong vowed in 1966—a comment that not only suggested Hanoi's sense that it was duped in 1946 and 1954, but was also one of those stunning ironies so abundant in the history of the Vietnam conflict, since avoiding a new Munich was also a central theme of the American involvement there.) Nor did the new American president yet understand, apparently, the full measure of the Communists' stubborn belief in their own ultimate triumph. "I think the Americans greatly underestimate the determination of the Vietnamese people," Ho Chi Minh had said, while John F. Kennedy was still in the White House and only a few thousand American soldiers had yet been sent to Vietnam. "The Vietnamese people have always shown great determination when they were faced with a foreign invader."

Neither Kennedy nor Lyndon Johnson gave enough weight to that warning; President Nixon would prove no wiser.

When it finally dawned on Nixon and Kissinger that the North Vietnamese were not interested in a compromise on terms acceptable to the U.S., their first response was to threaten redoubled military pressure.

"Measures of great consequence and force" would be taken, Nixon warned Hanoi, if there were no significant progress in the peace talks by November 1, 1969—the anniversary of Johnson's bombing halt. Pentagon planners were assigned to prepare not just for resuming the bombing but for greatly intensifying it. But Hanoi ignored the threat, and there was no consensus within the American government either in favor of reescalation or that any thinkable military step would really prove decisive. The only certain result would be domestic political storms worse than any that had already occurred, and perhaps a split in the administration itself. As his self-imposed deadline neared, Nixon allowed himself—rather easily, it seems—to be talked out of following through on his ultimatum. Putting his hopes instead on the Vietnamization concept and on the possible helpful influence of China and the Soviet Union, he let November 1 pass with no dramatic gesture. The unilateral withdrawal of American troops, which had begun after the Midway summit in June, was now an irreversible policy.

Thereafter the administration's attempt was—in Kissinger's words—"to pursue a middle course between capitulation and the seemingly endless stalemate that we had inherited." That, surely, must be one of the most astonishing purposes ever advanced for continuing a large, costly war. What could lie "between" capitulation and stalemate, after all, except a sort of slow-motion defeat? If that was the implied object of the administration's policy, moreover, it could not be acknowledged. No American government could justify the deaths of 15,000 more American soldiers for such a purpose, not to mention the far larger loss of Asian lives. Perhaps for that