

In the opening essay, Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon's national security adviser, sets forth the principal concerns and interests that shaped the Nixon administration's approach to Vietnam. He explains that the administration entered office determined to end U.S. involvement in Vietnam, but it needed to do so honorably—with America's prestige and credibility intact. In the next essay, Arnold Isaacs, a journalist who covered the Vietnam War from 1972 to 1975 and traveled extensively throughout Indochina, presents a strong indictment of the Nixon policy. The Nixon administration's preoccupation with America's credibility led to a grievous exaggeration of the regional and global stakes involved in Vietnam. Isaacs suggests that a policy designed to cut U.S. losses by as speedy as possible a withdrawal would better have served American interests. He especially faults Nixon for expanding the war into Cambodia.

Peace with Honor

HENRY KISSINGER

I reached high office unexpectedly at a particularly complex period of our national life. In the life of nations, as of human beings, a point is often reached when the seemingly limitless possibilities of youth suddenly narrow and one must come to grips with the fact that not every option is open any longer. This insight can inspire a new creative impetus, less innocent perhaps than the naive exuberance of earlier years, but more complex and ultimately more permanent. The process of coming to grips with one's limits is never easy. It can end in despair or in rebellion; it can produce a self-hatred that turns inevitable compromises into a sense of inadequacy.

America went through such a period of self-doubt and self-hatred in the late 1960s. The trigger for it was the war in Vietnam. Entered into gradually by two administrations, by 1969 it had resulted in over 31,000 American dead with no prospect of early resolution. It began with overwhelming public and Congressional approval, but this had evolved first into skepticism and then into increasingly hostile rebellion. For too many, a war to resist aggression had turned into a symbol of fundamental American evil. A decade that had begun with the bold declaration that America would

pay any price and bear any burden to ensure the survival and success of liberty had ended in an agony of assassinations, urban riots, and ugly demonstrations. The Sixties marked the end of our innocence; this was certain. What remained to be determined was whether we could learn from this knowledge or consume our substance in rebelling against the reality of our maturity.

The turmoil of the 1960s was all the more unsettling to Americans because it came at the end of an extraordinary period of American accomplishment. We had built alliances that preserved the peace and fostered the growth of the industrial democracies of North America, Western Europe, and Japan. We had helped create international economic institutions that had nourished global prosperity for a generation. We had promoted decolonization and pioneered in development assistance for the new nations. In a planet shrunk by communications and technology, in a world either devastated by war or struggling in the first steps of nationhood, the United States had every reason to take pride in its global contribution—its energy, idealism, and enduring accomplishment.

The fact remained that at the end of twenty years of exertion America was not at peace with itself. The consensus that had sustained our postwar foreign policy had evaporated. The men and women who had sustained our international commitments and achievements were demoralized by what they considered their failure in Vietnam. Too many of our young were in rebellion against the successes of their fathers, attacking what they claimed to be the overextension of our commitments and mocking the values that had animated the achievements. A new isolationism was growing. Whereas in the 1920s we had withdrawn from the world because we thought we were too good for it, the insidious theme of the late 1960s was that we should withdraw from the world because we were too evil for it.

Not surprisingly, American self-doubt proved contagious; it is hard for foreign nations to have more faith in a country than it has in itself. European intellectuals began to argue that the Cold War was caused by American as well as by Soviet policies; they urged their governments to break out of the vicious circle by peace initiatives of their own. Many European leaders, catering to this mood, became fervent advocates of détente, playing the role of a "bridge" between East and West—visiting Moscow, exploring ties with Peking, urging disarmament and East-West trade.

These protestations were all very well until the United States, in the late Sixties, began to take them to heart and adopt the policy implicit in them. Suddenly European statesmen reversed course. Now they were fearful of a US-Soviet condominium, a "Super-Yalta" in which American and Soviet leaders would settle global issues over the heads of European governments. In the year that saw the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the United States was accused by many of its allies of being at one and the same time too bellicose in Southeast Asia and too accommodating in its dealings with the Soviet Union. This ambivalence gnawed at the unity of the Alliance. Unnerved by events in Czechoslovakia, pressed by public opinion toward conciliation, impelled by conviction to strengthen security, the Western Alliance was becalmed like a ship dead in the water.

Similar uncertainty marked our other policies. For two decades our contacts with China had been limited to the reciprocal recriminations of sporadic ambassadorial meetings in Warsaw. The Middle East was explosive, but in the aftermath of the 1967 war no diplomacy was in train. Our domestic divisions prevented decisive initiatives. America seemed reduced to passivity in a world in which, with all our self-doubt, only our power could offer security, only our dedication could sustain hope.

In my view, Vietnam was not the cause of our difficulties but a symptom. We were in a period of painful adjustment to a profound transformation of global politics; we were being forced to come to grips with the tension between our history and our new necessities. For two centuries America's participation in the world seemed to oscillate between overinvolvement and withdrawal, between expecting too much of our power and being ashamed of it, between optimistic exuberance and frustration with the ambiguities of an imperfect world. I was convinced that the deepest cause of our national unease was the realization—as yet dimly perceived—that we were becoming like other nations in the need to recognize that our power, while vast, had limits. Our resources were no longer infinite in relation to our problems; instead we had to set priorities, both intellectual and material. In the Fifties and Sixties we had attempted ultimate solutions to specific problems; now our challenge was to shape a world and an American role to which we were permanently committed, which could no longer be sustained by the illusion that our exertions had a terminal point.

Any Administration elected in 1968 would have faced this problem. It was a colossal task in the best of circumstances; the war in Vietnam turned it into a searing and anguishing enterprise. . . .

I cannot yet write about Vietnam except with pain and sadness.

When we came into office over a half-million Americans were fighting a war ten thousand miles away. Their numbers were still increasing on a schedule established by our predecessors. We found no plans for withdrawals. Thirty-one thousand had already died. Whatever our original war aims, by 1969 our credibility abroad, the reliability of our commitments, and our domestic cohesion were alike jeopardized by a struggle in a country as far away from the North American continent as our globe permits. Our involvement had begun openly, and with nearly unanimous Congressional, public, and media approval. But by 1969 our country had been riven by protest and anguish, sometimes taking on a violent and ugly character. The comity by which a democratic society must live had broken down. No government can function without a minimum of trust. This was being dissipated under the harshness of our alternatives and the increasing rage of our domestic controversy.

Psychologists or sociologists may explain some day what it is about that distant monochromatic land, of green mountains and fields merging with an azure sea, that for millennia has acted as a magnet for foreigners who sought glory there and found frustration, who believed that in its rice fields and jungles some principle was to be established and entered them only to recede in disillusion. What has inspired its people to such flights

of heroism and monomania that a succession of outsiders have looked there for a key to some riddle and then been expelled by a ferocious persistence that not only thwarted the foreigner's exertions but hazarded his own internal balance?

Our predecessors had entered in innocence, convinced that the cruel civil war represented the cutting edge of some global design. In four years of struggle they had been unable to develop a strategy to achieve victory—and for all one can know now such a strategy was not attainable. They had done enough to produce a major commitment of American power and credibility but not enough to bring it to a conclusion. In the last year of the Johnson Administration the Communists had launched a massive countrywide offensive. Few students of the subject question today that it was massively defeated. But its scale and sacrifice turned it into a psychological victory. Under the impact of the Tet offensive we first curtailed and then ended our bombing of the North for no return except the opening of negotiations which our implacable adversary immediately stalemated. Public support was ebbing for a war we would not win but also seemed unable to end.

And in our country, opposition grew. It was composed of many strands: sincere pacifists who hated to see their country involved in killing thousands of miles away; pragmatists who could discern no plausible outcome; isolationists who wished to end American overseas involvement; idealists who saw no compatibility between our values and the horrors of a war literally brought home for the first time on television. And these groups were egged on by a small minority expressing the inchoate rage of the 1960s with shock tactics of obscenity and violence, expressing their hatred of America, its "system" and its "evil." All these groups had combined to produce the bitter chaos of the Democratic Convention of 1968, the campus violence, and the confusion and demoralization of the leadership groups that had sustained the great American postwar initiatives in foreign policy.

Richard Nixon inherited this cauldron. Of all choices he was probably the least suited for the act of grace that might have achieved reconciliation with the responsible members of the opposition. Seeing himself in any case the target of a liberal conspiracy to destroy him, he could never bring himself to regard the upheaval caused by the Vietnam war as anything other than a continuation of the long-lived assault on his political existence. Though he sympathized more with the anguish of the genuine protesters than they knew, he never mustered the self-confidence or the largeness of spirit to reach out to them. He accepted their premises that we faced a mortal domestic struggle; in the process he accelerated and compounded its bitterness.

Fairness compels the recognition that he had precious little help. After all, Hubert Humphrey, whose entire life was a reach for reconciliation, had been treated scarcely better during his campaign for the Presidency. And after Nixon took office those who had created our involvement in Vietnam moved first to neutrality and then to opposition, saddling Nixon with responsibility for a war he had inherited and attacking him in the name

of solutions they themselves had neither advocated nor executed when they had the opportunity.

The Nixon Administration entered office determined to end our involvement in Vietnam. But it soon came up against the reality that had also bedeviled its predecessor. For nearly a generation the security and progress of free people had depended on confidence in America. We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel. Many urged us to "emulate de Gaulle"; but they overlooked that it took even de Gaulle four years to extricate his country from Algeria because he, too, thought it important for France to emerge from its travails with its domestic cohesion and international stature intact. He extricated France from Algeria as an act of policy, not as a collapse, in a manner reflecting a national decision and not a rout.

Such an ending of the war was even more important for the United States. As the leader of democratic alliances we had to remember that scores of countries and millions of people relied for their security on our willingness to stand by allies, indeed on our confidence in ourselves. No serious policymaker could allow himself to succumb to the fashionable debunking of "prestige" or "honor" or "credibility." For a great power to abandon a small country to tyranny simply to obtain a respite from our own travail seemed to me—and still seems to me—profoundly immoral and destructive of our efforts to build a new and ultimately more peaceful pattern of international relations. We could not revitalize the Atlantic Alliance if its governments were assailed by doubt about American staying power. We would not be able to move the Soviet Union toward the imperative of mutual restraint against the background of capitulation in a major war. We might not achieve our opening to China if our value as a counterweight seemed nullified by a collapse that showed us irrelevant to Asian security. Our success in Middle East diplomacy would depend on convincing our ally of our reliability and its adversaries that we were impervious to threats of military pressure or blackmail. Clearly, the American people wanted to end the war, but every poll, and indeed Nixon's election (and the Wallace vote), made it equally evident that they saw their country's aims as honorable and did not relish America's humiliation. The new Administration had to respect the concerns of the opponents of the war but also the anguish of the families whose sons had suffered and died for their country and who did not want it determined—after the fact—that their sacrifice have been in vain.

The principles of America's honor and America's responsibility were not empty phrases to me. I felt them powerfully. I had been born in Germany in the Bavarian town of Fuerth, six months before Hitler's attempted beer-hall putsch in Bavaria's capital, Munich. Hitler came to power when I was nine years old. Nuremberg, of which Fuerth was a neighbor with the same physical and psychological relationship as Brooklyn has to New York, was known for its Nazi support, massive Nazi Party rallies, and the notorious racial laws. Until I emigrated to America, my family and I endured pro-

gressive ostracism and discrimination. My father lost the teaching job for which he had worked all his life; the friends of my parents' youth shunned them. I was forced to attend a segregated school. Every walk in the street turned into an adventure, for my German contemporaries were free to beat up Jewish children without interference by the police.

Through this period America acquired a wondrous quality for me. When I was a boy it was a dream, an incredible place where tolerance was natural and personal freedom unchallenged. Even when I learned later that America, too, had massive problems, I could never forget what an inspiration it had been to the victims of persecution, to my family, and to me during cruel and degrading years. I always remembered the thrill when I first walked the streets of New York City. Seeing a group of boys, I began to cross to the other side to avoid being beaten up. And then I remembered where I was.

I therefore have always had a special feeling for what America means, which native-born citizens perhaps take for granted. I could not accept the self-hatred that took every imperfection as an excuse to denigrate a precious experiment whose significance for the rest of the world had been part of my life. I was enormously gratified to have an opportunity to repay my debt to a society whose blemishes I recognized but also saw in a different perspective; they could not obscure for me its greatness, its idealism, its humanity, and its embodiment of mankind's hopes.

The domestic turmoil of the Vietnam debate therefore pained me deeply. I did not agree with many of the decisions that had brought about the impasse in Indochina; I felt, however, that my appointment to high office entailed a responsibility to help end the war in a way compatible with American self-respect and the stake that all men and women of goodwill had in America's strength and purpose. It seemed to me important for America not to be humiliated, not to be shattered, but to leave Vietnam in a manner that even the protesters might later see as reflecting an American choice made with dignity and self-respect. Ironically, in view of the later charges of "historical pessimism" leveled against me, it was precisely the issue of our self-confidence and faith in our future that I considered at stake in the outcome in Vietnam.

I believed in the moral significance of my adopted country. America, alone of the free countries, was strong enough to assure global security against the forces of tyranny. Only America had both the power and the decency to inspire other peoples who struggled for identity, for progress and dignity. In the Thirties, when the democracies faced the gravest danger, America was waiting in the wings to come to Europe's rescue. There was no one now to come to America's rescue if we abandoned our international responsibilities, or if we succumbed to self-hatred.

Unlike most of my contemporaries, I had experienced the fragility of the fabric of modern society. I had seen that the likely outcome of the dissolution of all social bonds and the undermining of all basic values is extremism, despair, and brutality. A people must not lose faith in itself; those who wallow in the imperfections of their society or turn them into

an excuse for a nihilistic orgy usually end up by eroding all social and moral restraints; eventually in their pitiless assault on all beliefs they multiply suffering.

I could never bring myself to think of the war in Vietnam as a monstrous criminal conspiracy, as was fashionable in some circles. In my view our entry into the war had been the product not of a militarist psychosis but of a naive idealism that wanted to set right all the world's ills and believed American goodwill supplied its own efficacy. I had visited Vietnam as a professor. I saw there not ugly Americans—though, as in all wars, these existed too—but dedicated young men facing death daily despite the divisions at home; my recollection was of many idealistic Americans working under impossible conditions to bring government and health and development to a terrified and bewildered people. I thought the country owed something to *their* sacrifice and not only to the vocal protesters. Some of the critics viewed Vietnam as a morality play in which the wicked must be punished before the final curtain and where any attempt to salvage self-respect from the outcome compounded the wrong. I viewed it as a genuine tragedy. No one had a monopoly on anguish.

I saw my role as helping my adopted country heal its wounds, preserve its faith, and thus enable it to rededicate itself to the great tasks of construction that were awaiting it.

The Limits of Credibility

ARNOLD ISAACS

It's time we recognized," declared Ronald Reagan, "that ours was, in truth, a noble cause." His campaign advisers had not wanted him to reawaken painful Vietnam memories. But the candidate personally penciled the phrase "noble cause" into his speech, it was said, to express his strong view that the nation should not reproach itself for the Vietnam conflict. "Let us tell those who fought in that war," he added, "that we will never again ask young men to fight and possibly die in a war our government is afraid to win." The 5,000 delegates at the Veterans of Foreign Wars 1980 convention—who had earlier broken their organization's long-standing precedent to endorse the Reagan candidacy—responded, one reporter wrote, with "sustained and boisterous cheers."

At the start of a new decade, the perception that American actions in Vietnam were a worthy effort, and that they failed not because they were misconceived but only because they were not carried out resolutely enough, seemed to respond to powerful needs in American life and institutions. It was a view that protected the reputations of the political leaders who shaped and executed those actions. It soothed military professionals who could not easily contemplate their own failure to achieve more decisive results

on the Vietnamese battlefields. And by placing Vietnam in the same framework of conventional patriotic values in which Americans viewed their other wars, it reassured a troubled people that they had not, after all, forfeited the special moral standing America claimed for itself among the world's nations. Shaking off Vietnam guilt seemed essential, too, to officials and commentators who feared, not wholly without reason, that a post-Vietnam reaction was preventing the United States from acting effectively in the world.

Clearly, America could not remain forever immobilized by its memories of Vietnam. But to distort those memories was to risk equal policy errors in the future, arising from the same blindnesses that produced the Vietnam failure. For what the United States really lacked in Vietnam was not persistence but understanding—that, and the flexibility to change policies that had proven bankrupt. From start to finish, American leaders remained catastrophically ignorant of Vietnamese history, culture, values, motives, and abilities. Misperceiving both its enemy and its ally and imprisoned in the myopic conviction that sheer military force could somehow overcome adverse political circumstances, Washington stumbled from one failure to the next in the continuing delusion that success was always just ahead. This ignorance and false hope were mated, in successive administrations, with bureaucratic circumstances that inhibited admission of error and made it always seem safer to keep repeating the same mistakes rather than risk the unknown perils of a different policy.

The wounds of that experience were painful enough. With the war finally over, the revisionist belief that it was lost only because of Washington's timidity, rather than for Vietnamese reasons, was the self-infliction of still another wound—a refusal to learn the lesson that had been so expensively taught.

The delusion of Vietnam policy in the Johnson administration, at least until 1968, was that increasing American military force could not just prevent defeat of an anti-Communist regime in Saigon, but could in time discourage Hanoi from supporting the revolutionary movement in the South, and thus end the conflict. The Nixon administration's delusion was more remarkable. It was that exactly the same objective could be reached while American military force was diminishing.

A good deal of evidence suggests that when Nixon and Henry Kissinger moved into the White House in January 1969, they understood that they were inheriting a failure: that the enormous military effort in Vietnam had ballooned out of all proportion to any conceivable American interest there, and that the spectacle of a huge, expensively-armed U.S. expeditionary force thrashing about in an unavailing contest with a poor, middle-sized Asian Communist state was certainly not serving any American purpose. Vietnam was making the U.S. "look like a paper tiger," Nixon is reported to have acknowledged privately in early 1968, adding his private conclusion that "there's no way to win the war. But we can't say that, of course. In fact, we have to seem to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage." Henry Kissinger too, by his own later account, be-

lieved when he took office that the war was "draining our national strength and had to be liquidated."

It is less clear how squarely Nixon or Kissinger faced the corollary of their logic: if the U.S. couldn't win, then Hanoi, presumably, couldn't lose. Kissinger left many acquaintances with the impression that he saw a Communist victory as tolerable, as long as it was suitably delayed to keep from openly humiliating the United States. Whether or not that was his real view, he certainly thought it useful for Hanoi—and Moscow—to be encouraged to believe so; the Vietnamese Communists, he evidently felt, would surely agree to a negotiated settlement once they understood that the U.S. would not actually seek to achieve its proclaimed goal of preserving a non-Communist regime in Saigon indefinitely. It would only be necessary for Hanoi to conclude, in other words, that Washington did not really mean what it said. To the administration's early offers of "serious talks," however, the North Vietnamese simply repeated their customary demands for total withdrawal of U.S. forces and removal of the Saigon "puppet administration."

Kissinger was shocked and angry at Hanoi's apparent lack of concern for American face. And he appears to have found completely unaccountable the fact that instead of saying one thing in public and something else in private, like the straightforward Americans, Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues kept saying the same unacceptable things no matter in which channel they were conveyed. Others might have considered that perhaps the Vietnamese Communists meant what they were saying. But to Kissinger, their refusal to be duplicitous was inexplicable, even suspect. It reflected a Vietnamese style of communication which he complained in his memoirs, "was indirect and, by American standards, devious or baffling."

Whoever was being devious, Nixon and Kissinger evidently continued to believe for some months that Hanoi would agree to what they saw as a reasonable, even generous, compromise. Journalists accompanying Nixon to his Midway Island summit with Nguyen Van Thieu in June 1969 were given the impression that he had "made up his mind to do whatever he has to do in order to extricate the United States" from the war; the president's and Kissinger's appraisal, newsmen were told, was that Hanoi and the Liberation Front were "just about ready for serious negotiations." Two months after Midway, when he began his secret meetings with North Vietnamese representatives, Kissinger "still half believed that rapid progress would be made" if the Communists could be convinced of American sincerity. As late as the end of September, Nixon expressed his hope publicly. "Once the enemy recognizes that it is not going to win its objectives by waiting us out," he told a press conference, "then the enemy will negotiate and we will end this war before the end of 1970. That is the objective we have."

In part, these expectations seem to have reflected a real belief in the generosity of their own proposals. Apparently, too, Nixon and Kissinger thought the Russians and Chinese could and would deliver a Vietnam settlement in return for American consideration on other matters. Both beliefs

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

reason, though Nixon and Kissinger had seemed to realize before taking office that the overriding U.S. interest was extrication from the war, once in power they seemed to shrink from the logic of their own perceptions.

There were, no doubt, varied personal and institutional reasons for this. Advocating a distasteful policy from outside the government was surely easier than actually beginning to carry it out. Too, once in the White House, Nixon and Kissinger were suddenly subject to a huge array of institutional pressures arising from a self-justifying system in which numerous reputations and bureaucratic interests could only be preserved by reaffirming existing policy. The information supplied by that system, while not entirely suppressing unwelcome truths, was certainly tilted toward justifying past decisions. As the settlement they had thought they could achieve kept eluding them, Nixon's and Kissinger's attitudes toward the North Vietnamese grew more baleful; it would have taken far more forgiving personalities than theirs not to begin wishing to punish those who denied them the political triumph both men thirsted for. Nixon and Kissinger were driven, also, by anger at domestic critics—particularly those who had participated in Johnson's war policies and thus seemed, to the new administration, outrageous hypocrites. And by temporizing, the new president and his adviser changed the choices before them perhaps more quickly than they had imagined would happen. Within less than a year of taking office, they no longer had the freedom to act as if undoing the mistakes of previous administrations; instead, they were compelled to vindicate the consequences of their own actions.

When their first hopeful overtures were rebuffed by Hanoi, Nixon and Kissinger spent the rest of their first year in office not disengaging from the war but imprisoning themselves in it, just as the Johnson administration had done. By the fall of 1969, Nixon's private comments no longer admitted the war was unwinnable or predicted its swift settlement. Instead, he was telling visitors, in words that could have been Lyndon Johnson's, "I will not be the first President of the United States to lose a war."

Like Johnson, too, Nixon came to see dissenters not as honorable critics but as witting or unwitting agents of treason. His administration soon began to recapitulate its predecessor's depressing descent into an intellectual and emotional state of siege. As criticism grew, his and Kissinger's differing insecurities seemed to bond, like two chemicals, into a new compound of angry, defensive rigidity. Within the fortress of their beliefs they listened, as the writer David Halberstam observed, "only to others who were believers." All doubts, whether arising from within the government or outside, were associated with weakness or disloyalty, and rejected.

Dissenting views were banished, too, as the result of Kissinger's bureaucratic style. Toward any possible competitors for power or influence, Kissinger's attitude was—no other word seems adequate—pathological. Through "incessant backbiting," as speechwriter Raymond Price called it, and by every other technique he could devise, some amazingly petty, Kissinger maneuvered to keep all rivals out of foreign policy decisions. With respect to Vietnam, he was largely successful. Among those excluded, to

the extent of Kissinger's considerable ability to do so, were Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and Secretary of State William Rogers, both of whom, for various reasons, hoped to reinforce Nixon's initial impulse to extricate himself and the country from the war. Instead, Laird and Rogers were largely shut out of Vietnam decision making. More than any other U.S. endeavor of such magnitude before or since, Vietnam policy in the Nixon administration came under the utter domination of only two men, who grew steadily more impervious to any perspectives that differed from their own.

If there was a single act by which the Nixon administration closed the trap on itself, it was the decision to send U.S. forces into Cambodia at the end of April 1970.

All else they had done in Indochina, Nixon and Kissinger could claim—and the American public could agree—was a matter of cleaning up someone else's mess. But Cambodia was their own. Americans knew the half-million-man army flailing about in Vietnam was not sent there by Nixon, and they seemed willing to allow him a rather generous amount of time to extricate it in some fashion that would avoid national humiliation. They did want to see it extricated, though, and sending soldiers to fight in another Indochinese nation hardly seemed like the same thing. Neither did the strident, belligerent explanations from the White House. Cambodia could not be reconciled with Nixon's promise to end the war, and that, it seemed to me, was the real reason it generated such domestic outrage.

Anger at the Cambodian offensive was answered by an equal rage in the White House against its critics. But the more Nixon and Kissinger made the war theirs, the more damaging and painful failure appeared; and the more they had to defend their actions, the more they were compelled to assert illusory achievements and unreachable goals—like Lyndon Johnson, who was driven at last to lash out at Robert Kennedy, "We are going to win this war, and in six months all you doves will be politically dead." Nixon, too, especially after Cambodia, could only vindicate his decisions with success. That need nourished both the administration's wishful hope that Hanoi would somehow prove more flexible than it sounded and that it could be pressured into giving the U.S. an acceptable settlement, and its equally wishful overestimate of Saigon's effectiveness. Nixon's and Kissinger's expectations contradicted the realities that American influence on Vietnamese events was lessening as its military effort lessened and that there was no sustainable support for stronger measures; Hanoi, meanwhile, not the U.S., still controlled the pace and course of the war while remaining single-mindedly bent not on compromise, but victory.

Unable to resolve those contradictions, Nixon began to see the source of his frustrations in American, not Vietnamese, realities. Not Hanoi but the American antiwar movement "destroyed whatever small possibility may still have existed of ending the war in 1969," he wrote in his memoirs. His critics' motives were, in effect, treasonous. "North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that," he declared on November 3, 1969, in the "silent majority" speech he substituted for the military blows he had threatened. In that concept lay one significant

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

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

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

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

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

they were everything. If the deterrent was used, deterrence would have failed. If the image did not do its preventive work and there was a resort to action, the whole purpose of the policy would have been defeated."

Since credibility could never be proven, the only way to establish it was to demonstrate its attributes in all other American actions in the world, while also avoiding failures or irresolution that might contradict the desired image. Thus, once U.S. forces were committed in Vietnam, the original reasons quickly lost their primacy. What became necessary for the United States was not any given set of results that could be defined as a success, but rather a display of American determination, effectiveness, and reliability as an ally. Had this not been true, the stated U.S. war aims could not have shifted so greatly during the course of the conflict. American patience was exhausted by a war whose dominant impression was of soldiers fighting again and again over the identical terrain, without advancing or retreating or winning or losing, without any apparent relationship to any other battles before or afterward, and without visible movement toward a decisive result. But that image was an accurate metaphor for the policy. The result of the war was less important to Washington than the act of fighting it.

The U.S. intervened in Vietnam initially with ideas of defeating a Communist insurgency, containing what it then saw as a menacing and expansionist China, and disproving theories of liberation war, among other reasons. By the time the Nixon administration came to power, however, what mattered fundamentally to the U.S. leadership was not what happened to the Vietnamese, much less to the Lao or the Cambodians, but what happened to the world's—and particularly the Soviet Union's—impression of American capability and resolve. Nixon's rapprochement with the Chinese leadership made much of the war's original rationale meaningless and thus made its actual outcome a matter of even less concern to him or to the American government. If some form of settlement on America's minimum terms could be reached, so much the better. But even if there were no settlement, or one that failed, that would not be critically damaging either, as long as the United States was not perceived to weaken.

Defining goals in Vietnam with regard to the American image elsewhere was not invented by the Nixon administration, by any means. As long ago as the beginning of 1962 the Joint Chiefs of Staff had argued for intervention on the grounds that, along with the defense of Southeast Asia from Communism, "of equal importance" was the "psychological impact that a firm position by the United States will have on the countries of the world—both free and Communist." The real trap lay in the negative of that proposition: "A United States political and/or military withdrawal . . . would have an adverse psychological impact," the Chiefs also warned, "of even greater proportion." This, when only a few more than 2,500 American soldiers had been sent to Vietnam and only a dozen or so had been killed or wounded.

Three years later, with the Johnson administration poised to commit major ground forces to the conflict, a Defense Department official, John McNaughton, wrote what would become one of the most widely quoted

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

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

other words, was exactly what Schell called the war: a piece of theater, in which Vietnamese actors were expected to follow a script written not to resolve the conflict that was ravaging their country, but to make an American failure look like a success and thus preserve America's reputation elsewhere in the world.

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