The Vietnam War and the Nixon-Kissinger Conception of National Security: Parity, Patterns of Abuse, and Domestic Divisions

Seth Center
University of Virginia

Mentor:
Michael J. Smith
University of Virginia

Miller Center Fellowship Conference
Charlottesville, Virginia
May 10, 2007

When Richard Nixon entered office in the winter of 1969, he was convinced that American national security was threatened by three mutually reinforcing factors: 1) the very real problem of emerging strategic parity with the Soviet Union 2) a pattern of international abuse against American interests discernible in world events 3) the possibility that U.S. domestic divisions could so enervate US foreign policy that the problem of parity and the pattern of abuse could not be adequately managed by policymakers. Nixon decided that managing America's image abroad was essential for confronting these interlocking problems. And he decided that Vietnam was the most important place to shape that image.

These three conditions made the management of America's image abroad too important to leave to the custodianship of the United States Information Agency. Nixon's view of international politics and the dilemmas the United States confronted were fundamentally different from those of America's professional image-makers. In neither action nor rhetoric would Nixon make ideals a centerpiece of his foreign policy. His administration explicitly rejected the ideological competition that had been a key component of earlier Cold War strategy. Nixon was determined to avoid going "on and on about liberty and freedom and all of that…" Henry Kissinger felt the same way. It was not "proper" for the president to "start lecturing" about American ideals abroad. "Oh, no, no, no, no, no…" Nixon concurred. "All that USIA stuff," Kissinger said, should not be a part of their national security strategy.[1]

Nixon disavowed America's mission to propagate its revolutionary ideology in the world and he sought to force America's adversaries to do the same. Ideological

[1] 238. Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) May 17, 1972, Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, Volume XIV

confrontation, he argued, was no longer an adequate guidepost for international relations. "Today," Nixon proclaimed, "the 'isms' have lost their vitality."[2] The United States would see the world unvarnished and stripped of the distorting lens of any ideological mission. "Accommodation to the diversity of the world community," Nixon stated in his 1973 foreign policy report to Congress, "is the keystone of our current policy." Lest anyone misunderstand what he meant, the President explained that, despite his "preference" for democracy and economic openness, "…we must be prepared to deal realistically with governments as they are."[3] This principle was essential to his geopolitical worldview. As he told Mao Zedong, there was a "recognition on our part that what is important is not a nation's internal political philosophy. What is important is its policy toward the rest of the world and toward us."[4] Nixon laid out the logical extension of this thought process, "We cannot gear our foreign policy to transformation of other societies." Instead, the United States should pursue an equally "high moral objective," peace between nations with "totally different systems of government."[5]

Nixon envisioned a "Generation of Peace"—Kissinger called it a "Structure of Peace." Détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China could stabilize international relations in a dynamic balance of power. Even in a "de-ideologized" world, however, containment was still the *sin qua non* of a grand vision. As Kissinger said, "If we fulfilled our responsibility to block Soviet encroachments, coexistence could be reliable and the principles of détente could be seen to have marked the path to a more

---

[2] Richard Nixon, First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970's. *February 18th, 1970*

[3] Nixon 1973 State of the World, May 3, 1973 [Check cite????? Pg????]

[4] Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 64. Nixon frequently repeated this phrase. See for example, Memorandum of Conversation, October 3, 1970. NSA Vietnam Collection, 1968-1975. ["The US should judge governments by their use to us…."]

[5] RN, Naval Academy Commencement Remarks, June 5, 1974, PPP Doc. 165, p. 472.

hopeful future."[6] What this meant in practice was that in the short-term, Nixon and Kissinger's strategy deviated little, if at all, from that of their predecessors' goals. Peace required an "equilibrium of power" and Kissinger promised that "this Government will maintain it." Any "realistic hope" of better relations with Communist powers depended on a strong America that left other countries "no realistic course except restraint and cooperation." [7] Only a policy that ensured that the Soviet Union was constantly warded from violence…" could hope to succeed over the long run.[8] However, if the Soviets tested, probed, and continued to exploit weaknesses in the global system to expand their power, Kissinger warned that "we may have to confront them." [9]

Confrontation threatened to quickly escalate into crisis. And that was a terrifying scenario in a world of nuclear weapons. Both Nixon and Kissinger dreaded the prospect of a crisis with Moscow. They had to preserve their freedom of movement so that they would never have to make the choice between a nuclear strike and capitulation. Kissinger warned, "As superpowers, we risk being trapped by a situation. Because of the great dominance of nuclear weaponry, you must never crowd your opponent into the corner."[10] In his memoirs, Nixon celebrated his own statesmanship in giving the Soviet Union graceful and low key exits from "crises" in Cuba and the Middle East. In the White House, however, Nixon and Kissinger were far more concerned with the Soviets painting *them* into a corner. They worried that the Soviets would misconstrue America's posture

---

[6] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p 316—from White House Years, 1132, 1250.
[7] Kissinger at Economic Club of Detroit, November, 24, 1975. Department of State Press Release no. 578. CU Box 312.3.150.
[8] Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger to Time-Life Dinner, May 4, 1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00479.
[9] Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) April 9, 1972, *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. XIV. Doc 87.
[10] Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger to Time-Life Dinner, May 4, 1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00479.

and will, and in the process of trying to probe for advantages Moscow would fail to appreciate the risks and consequences of its actions.[11] Washington would have no choice but to respond and the outcome was almost too horrific to contemplate.

America's image abroad was integral to preventing this scenario from ever playing out. In the President's mind, America's image had nothing to do with spreading the American dream, winning the hearts and minds of mankind, or correcting distorted images of American society. While Nixon constantly referred to American "prestige," he conceptualized it strictly in terms of power. Prestige was not a question of which society produced better washing machines or was more "popular" in the Third World. Rather prestige was indistinguishable from the "respect that one nation has for another's integrity in defending its principles and meeting its obligations."[12] American prestige was not a tool for transforming international life, but a component of American deterrence. It was more important for the United States to convey what it was prepared to stand *against* than to explain what America stood *for*.

Nixon chose to stake America's "prestige," "credibility," "reliability"—he used the terms interchangeably— on the Vietnam War. The determination to transcend the Cold War and avoid future crises made the outcome in Vietnam more rather than less important in his and Kissinger's estimation. In the irony of ironies, somehow they concluded that the future success of their project to build a new "structure of peace" was contingent on the resolution of a war that's failure had made their very rise to power

[11] Second Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy, February 25th, 1971. PPP, Doc 75.

[12] Nixon, Address to the Nation on Vietnam. *May 14th, 1969. PPP*, Doc. 195 - *See also for an almost direct repetition.* [requoted in state of the world 1970]

possible. Indeed, the entire "structure of peace" hinged on the successful resolution of the Vietnam War. If they could manage American failure in Vietnam they would salvage America's prestige, prevent confrontation elsewhere, avoid the possibility of crisis, and hence preempt catastrophe.

"Everything," Nixon and Kissinger always said, was at stake in the outcome in Vietnam. Even after Nixon visited China and the summit talks with Moscow were underway, the centrality of Vietnam in Nixon's worldview did not waver. "There ain't no way," Nixon said, that the US could have détente with the Soviet Union if South Vietnam fell. "The US will be finished as a world power. It's that bad," he warned. He doubted that there had "ever" been a situation in which "so much was on the line."[13] If the United States abandoned Vietnam and left the Saigon regime to its fate, Nixon warned, it would have a "catastrophic effect on this country and the cause of peace in the years ahead."[14] Kissinger decided that if the United States was "run out" of Vietnam, it would be a "demonstration of impotence" for all of the world to see.[15] Peace in Vietnam was not merely the beginning of new era of international politics, it was the lynchpin.

The important question is not whether Nixon and Kissinger were sincere in their conception of the role of Vietnam in their broader vision of world politics—it is almost certain that they were. Rather we must pursue the question of why they felt so strongly about the outcome in Vietnam. Beyond Southeast Asia, Nixon and Kissinger saw a dangerous world that they viewed through the lens of deep strategic pessimism. Foremost loomed the problem of parity. Over the past decade the United States had lost

[13] Editorial Note, April 10, 1972. *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. XIV. Doc 89
[14] 139 - Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia.
April 30th, 1970 [checkkkk]

[15] Conversation between Nixon and Kissinger, January 20, 1972. FRUS, 1969-1976, Vol. XIV, Doc. 38

its overwhelming nuclear superiority. Now a Cold War crisis would be even more dangerous. Worse, as the Soviet Union moved toward strategic parity, it would be emboldened to expand its political influence, which would make confrontation and potential crisis even more likely. Concurrently, a pattern of abuse seemed to be emerging from a series of events around the world. America's prestige appeared to be in rapid decline, which indicated that America's reputation—part of its deterrent capability—was in the process of being lost. If the effects of parity were not already being felt with the pattern of abuse serving as striking evidence, then certainly America's weak response to recent challenges would invite further abuses that could only lead to crisis or capitulation.

The Problem of Parity

The significance of Vietnam to the "Structure of Peace" begins not with the dominos in Southeast Asia or with the "silent majority," who demanded "peace with honor" at home, or even with question of American credibility, which dominated Nixon's thinking. These issues are all vital to understanding "why Vietnam," but it is impossible to explain Nixon's decision to make Johnson's war his own without understanding the Cuban Missile Crisis. Or more aptly, how Nixon and Kissinger understood the events of October 1962 in the context of the emerging strategic balance of power and the peril of Cold War crisis. The problem of strategic nuclear parity is the overlooked, if not altogether ignored key to unlocking the Nixon and Kissinger worldview and their near obsession with Vietnam. In a future of strategic parity, deterrence theory, at least as understood by policymakers, presaged Soviet adventurism and heightened danger of a new Cold War crisis, the likes of which had not been seen since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The administration took office convinced that America's strategic position had declined dramatically in the past decade. Throughout the 1960s Nixon had attacked Democrats for allowing a "gravely serious security gap." He blamed it on the "peculiar, unprecedented doctrine called 'parity' [that] meant America would no longer try to be first." Parity, Nixon said, had done the US "incalculable damage."[16] However cynical the manipulation of parity for his own political ends, Nixon's actions once in office suggested that he took very seriously such a "security gap" existed. Privately and publicly the administration anguished over the "inescapable reality" that Soviet strategic power was approaching or could even exceed the United States' power in the near future.[17] The shift in the strategic balance since the mid 1960s had been "extraordinary." By "objective measure" Kissinger said, the balance of power had shifted "dramatically." The "erosion of power" suffered by the United States was undeniable. [18] For the Nixon administration this was no "missile gap" or "bomber gap" canard.

It was clear that the United States had lost a "degree of deterrence" in the past several years. But in the abstract realm of nuclear warfighting it was hard to say what the implications were for such a realization. No one believed the danger of a Soviet first strike was at stake. While it was generally acknowledged that the United States could not expect to regain a position "markedly superior" to the Soviets, policymakers were nonetheless "highly confident" that the United States could maintain a "credible strategic

[16] Quoted in Jules Whitcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, pp. 403-404.
[17] State of the World 1970 Check cite?????? P.[viii] 2/18/1970 [1].
[18] Memorandum of Conversation with Conservatives, August 12, 1971. NSA Kissinger Transcripts 00330.

posture with respect to attacks on the US no matter how Soviet strategic programs develop." [19] In that sense the problem of parity remain in the realm of abstraction.

From the perspective of political leverage, however, the situation looked dangerous. The primary objective of the US strategic force was to "deny other countries the ability to impose their will on the United States and its allies under the weight of strategic military superiority," [20] and it was no longer clear if the United States had that capability. Kissinger was certain that the different strategic relationship emerging between the US and the USSR must somehow be reflected in international politics. Offering one hypothetical scenario, Kissinger said that he could not imagine that anyone would actually "win" in a nuclear exchange in which one side suffered 120 million casualties while the other side suffered just 90 million. However, as one of his staffers pointed out, there was "rough equivalence" between 90 and 120 million, but what if the casualty disparity was wider? What if it were 80 million versus 150 million? Would that calculation change Soviet and American political judgments? This point was essential, even if the exact consequences were unknowable. How was it possible, Kissinger wondered, to "write a long disquisition on the changed strategic relationship that all agreed has taken place during the past few years, without acknowledging its impact on the ability of American strategic forces to provide local defense?" [21]

During the era of American strategic superiority, policymakers could be confident that their capacity to unleash a disabling first strike on the USSR gave the US the flexibility to "deal with" any local conflict. That confidence was no longer a given. As

[19] Memorandum for Office of Vice President, et. al. "Review of US Strategic Posture (NSSM 3). 6/5/1969. NSA Presidential Directives, 300.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Minutes of NSC Review Group Meeting, "Review of U.S. Strategic Posture," 5/29/1969. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, Doc. 00024.

the Soviets grew stronger, a direr scenario was emerging: "If a country has superiority, one doesn't have to worry about a disarming first strike. Local situations therefore take on added significance." The Soviets, Kissinger warned, were not "building missiles to be nice. Somewhere their umbrella will be translated into political power." [22]

Nixon concluded that the problem of parity "really relates to the aggressiveness of their foreign policy." Kissinger agreed: "Our concern is with their confidence…." The danger, he repeated, was not a strike on the United States; however, "their [the Soviets] assured destruction edge affects their willingness to be aggressive." It was, the national security advisor explained, the "relationship of this new situation to local aggression" that was the "important point." The real problem, Nixon said, was that the Soviets "used to know how an American President might react. But not now." The threat of "massive retaliation" had given the president "freedom to act" in the past, but now a strategy of flexible response was "baloney." Nixon was concerned: "Our bargaining position has shifted. We must face facts."[23]

This raised a serious question: how would the dynamics of another Cold War crisis be affected by the shifting strategic balance? If the United States increased its ICBM force by 20%, for instance, would it really give the United States more "confidence" in a crisis?" Kissinger wondered [24] He, his boss, and his staffers were certainly prepared to conclude that history provided clear answers. As one of Kissinger's

[22] Minutes of NSC Meeting on Defense Strategy, August 13, 1973. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00332.
[23] Notes on NSC Meeting, February 14, 1969. NSA Kissinger Transcripts. 00003.
[24] Minutes of NSC Review Group Meeting, "Review of U.S. Strategic Posture," May 29, 1969. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, Doc. 00024.

staffer's warned, "The thinner you slice your relative strategic posture the riskier it becomes to be firm during a crisis."[25]

There was nothing abstract about this type of thinking. The memory of strategic preponderance was seared in Nixon and Kissinger's minds. They recalled through rose-hued lenses the great diplomatic advantages enjoyed by past policymakers because of the United States' earlier Cold War nuclear superiority. The favorable balance of power had been the key to past successes and its looming shift represented unprecedented danger for America. Time and again they returned to Eisenhower and Kennedy, presidents who by virtue of their massive strategic advantages could confidently defend American interests secure in the knowledge that they could control any escalatory spiral. What was certain for Nixon and Kissinger was that they could not respond to a potential crisis to resolve it on acceptable terms. They could not afford to go to the brink as Kennedy had during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Truman and Eisenhower had been willing to do in the Berlin and Taiwan Straits Crises.

The Cuban Missile Crisis had occurred just six and a half years earlier, even if the psychological distance seemed much greater. The events of October 1962—or policymakers' recollection of those events—demonstrated the value of nuclear superiority and conversely the perils of living without dominance. Kennedy, Nixon recalled, had enjoyed a five to one advantage in strategic nuclear weapons, which gave him the "confidence" to face down the Soviets over Cuba. Now that the Soviets and the US had reached a "balance of terror," Nixon lamented that, "We can't do this today." [26] Kissinger recalled how Kennedy had "taken pride in the fact that he had run the risk of

[25] Minutes of NSC Review Group Meeting, "Review of U.S. Strategic Posture," May 29, 1969. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, Doc. 00024.
[26] Notes on NSC Meeting, February 14, 1969. NSA Kissinger Transcripts. 00003.

nuclear war" in facing down Khrushchev. Kennedy's boldness, Kissinger explained, derived from the fact that the Soviets had just 75 ICBMs. Today, they had 1200. Any reasonable analysis would suggest the United States could not possible enjoy such confidence in a future crisis.[27] Nixon and his advisor came back to this lesson again and again throughout his presidency.

While the problem of parity unto itself did not challenge world order, it provided the backdrop for understanding a world in which the Soviets and the U.S. had reached a "balance of terror" and potentially threatened to exceed it. Emerging strategic parity did not guarantee that the Soviet Union would pursue an aggressive foreign policy or intentionally exacerbate international tensions, let alone willfully precipitate a crisis. Soviet intentions were no more knowable now than they had been at any previous stage of the Cold War. However, conditions certainly looked propitious for Soviet opportunism.

Theory, memory, experience, and logic all suggested that the Soviets would do something with their new found strategic power and that something pointed to expanding its political influence by exploiting the evident weaknesses in all dimensions of American power. Assuming the Soviets would be more aggressive, parity also increased the likelihood of a crisis and made its resolution more dangerous. Parity was thus a double edged sword that predisposed policymakers to expect and fear challenges to US prestige.

Pattern of Abuse

Nixon's worldview was shaped by a sense of American weakness that is almost incomprehensible from a post-Cold War perspective. Both he and Kissinger were convinced that a pattern of abuse could be discerned in recent global events. In their

[27] Memorandum of Conversation with Conservatives, August 12, 1971. NSA Kissinger Transcripts 00330.

understanding of international politics, this was deeply troubling. The lack of respect for the United States suggested that another dimension of American deterrence was slipping away. If the Soviet Union was not yet exploiting America's apparent weakness, it almost certainly would in the future.

Throughout Nixon's career, pre-presidential and the White House years, he expressed a consistent and rudimentary philosophy of international relations: "Strength which commands respect is the only foundation on which peace among nations can ever be built."[28] During Nixon's vice-presidential trip to the Soviet Union in 1959, he laid out the essential conditions of a peaceful world. Peace, he told the Soviet people, could only be realized when "each of us is strong and respects the strength the other possesses." Peace motivated by one nation's weakness could never endure because neither country could "tolerate being pushed around" no matter how great the desire for peace or the danger of war.[29] He restated this proposition again as he accepted the Republican party nomination for President in 1960. He pledged that if elected, he would ensure that "we are never in a position at the conference table where Mr. Khrushchev or his successor is able to coerce an American president because of Communist strength and our weakness." The president of the United States "must leave no doubt at anytime that in Berlin or in Cuba or anywhere else in the world, America will not tolerate being pushed around by anybody."[30]

Kissinger largely shared this outlook. Reputation was an inescapable component of deterrence and reputation was shaped in large part by others' perception of past

[28] Nixon remarks at the VFW Annual Convention, August 19th, 1971.

[29]Radio-Television Address from Moscow, August 1, 1959. Reprinted in Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 438.

[30] Richard Nixon's Acceptance Speech, July 28, 1960. Reprinted in Nixon, *Six Crisis*, p. 453.

behavior. Kissinger had confronted this problem in past academic writing. The side which had a greater reputation for "ruthlessness or for a greater willingness to run risks gains a diplomatic advantage," Kissinger explained. And assessments of ruthlessness and risk-taking were effected by what he termed "*the experience of the last use of force*." This notion affected both the principle protagonists and also lesser states forced to make their own calculations about which direction to lean. Thus, in Kissinger's mind, the assessments that these nations made about their own will to resist aggression, bandwagon or balance, "may depend on assessments of past actions of West and Communist nations."[31] When Kissinger had made this observation in 1962, he juxtaposed Moscow's brutal repression in Hungary in 1956 and China's crackdown in Tibet with the United States' experience in the Korean War. While the communists had reaffirmed clearly to the world their "reputation for ruthless and overwhelming power," the Korean War had only produced "bitter domestic debate and a seeming resolve never again to engage in what many have described as an 'unproductive' war."[32] In 1968, Moscow had just destroyed dissent in Czechoslovakia while dissent within the United States against the Vietnam War seemed to be destroying the United States. It did not take any stretch of the imagination to see that events since 1962 could only entrench such worldwide impressions even more deeply and confirm for Kissinger that the predicted "lessons" had been learned.

American weakness was on Richard Nixon's mind when he accepted the Republican Party's nomination for President in August, 1968. Earlier that year an American naval vessel, the USS *Pueblo*, had been attacked and captured by North Korea.

[31] Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice*, pp. 48-49.
[32] Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice*, pp. 48-49.

The former vice-president called this the "ultimate insult" and clear evidence that respect for America was at an all time low in the world. Months after the incident, the *Pueblo*'s crew was still in Communist hands and the United States had not responded to the provocation of this "fourth rate military power." Elsewhere in the world, Nixon saw evidence that American prestige was sinking as well. He complained of US embassies stoned, ambassadors spit on, and USIS libraries burned. And of course there was the problem of Vietnam, which Nixon avoided, but clearly pervaded the entire question of America's image in the world. It was time, Nixon declared, to "restore prestige and respect for America abroad." America's leadership was challenged and adversaries were testing American strength.[33]

Within a month of Nixon assuming office North Vietnam initiated an offensive that Nixon interpreted as a "deliberate test, clearly designed to take measure of me and my administration at the onset." Then, in April, North Korea shot down an American EC-121, and Nixon explained that he reacted with the same instincts he had in February: that adversaries were testing America's will in a "calculated and cold blooded challenge." This pattern of abuse needed to be stymied and reversed. Kissinger argued that a strong reaction was imperative to "signal that for the first time in years the United States was sure of itself." Something was needed to "shore up" allied morale and "give pause" to enemies.[34]

In September 1969, Kissinger took the unusual step of passing an analysis of a former mentor, Fritz Kraemer, directly to Nixon. In Kissinger's covering memorandum, he explained the "gravity of the situation" and the significance of Kraemer's paper in

[33] Richard Nixon, Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech, *August 8th, 1968.*
[34] RN Memoris pp. 380-384.

defining the "problem we face" in the United States' "generally deteriorating" strategic position. Kissinger saw no reason for Communist pessimism, contrary to what many public commentators suggested. In fact, compared to the situation early in the Cold War, Moscow had to be somewhat buoyed. In the Middle East, Russian influence was spreading and moderate governments were under pressure; in Latin America guerilla war and the potential for "Nasser-type" or even communist regimes—either way with an anti-American orientation—continued to grow; NATO was in a state of "malaise;" and in Asia, US allies were anxious about a post-Vietnam US withdrawal from the region.[35]

Nixon was in the unenviable position of inheriting a legacy of decline, retrenchment, division and defeatism. While it was impossible to "fight this trend on every issue," Kissinger warned that the implications for the general trajectory of events were dangerous. Foreign policy, after all, depended on "an accumulation of nuances," and the United States had given little reason in recent years for opponents to believe that "we will stick to our position" on important issues. In Kissinger's mind, the lessons of the past decade were leading adversaries toward drawing "dangerous conclusions" about America's will. If Hanoi could simply wait out the United States to achieve its goals in Vietnam, why wouldn't the Soviets reach similar conclusions elsewhere in the world? "I believe," Kissinger warned "that we therefore face the prospect of major confrontations."[36]

Nixon carefully read and annotated Kraemer's analysis. Kraemer's essay found in a seemingly disparate series of global events a "single 'strategic theater;"—in which the

[35] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

[36] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

"single stones of the mosaic actually form a clearly recognizable overall tableau."[37] The "overall image" of the United States in the world, Kraemer warned, was that of a "reluctant giant." America sought peace and reconciliation "almost feverishly," was withdrawing its military forces not simply in Vietnam but in "many" places around the globe, was "tired" of relying on its physical might, and was "firmly resolved" to cut existing commitments and to avoid "for a very long time to come" any confrontation that risked military involvement. Underscoring the entire passage, Nixon wrote "Sad but true!"[38]

Vietnam was an "indicator" of overall US strategy and any "objective analyst" in the world could not help but conclude that "so far, all the indicators point in one direction only: an ultimate pullout, a radical reduction of military commitments, a withdrawal of US military power not simply in hotly contested Vietnam but on a worldwide scale." Yet Vietnam was only the most visible of a series of events throughout the world that were all interconnected. The South Koreans witnessed the United States' "meek" response to the *Pueblo* piracy and the EC-121 shoot down, and the Japanese, however much they wanted the sovereignty issues in Okinawa resolved for domestic political reasons, nonetheless felt a growing sense of insecurity because of fear of American withdrawal.[39] Likewise the decreasing of the military budget, the downsizing of ground and naval forces, and even the end of the draft, created the "impression of an irreversible trend" and a

[37] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

[38] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

[39] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

"deliberate" American decision to "liquidate" its global positions and retreat into isolationism. [40]

If there were any doubts in the White House that a pattern of abuse existed, they were extinguished by the fall of 1970. In both the Middle East and Cuba, the Soviets seemed intent on testing the limits of American tolerance. In the summer of 1970, after nine months of stagnant talks on Middle East peace, the Soviets sent advanced anti-aircraft systems and Soviet fighter jets along with Soviet pilots to Egypt. Once again the Soviets were probing and American weakness risked being confirmed. As policymakers debated Soviet intentions for sending combat troops to the non-communist UAR, Nixon feared that Moscow was not seeking merely to deter further Israeli encroachments into the Egyptian heartland to further the chances for a negotiated settlement, but rather to expand its influence more directly in the Middle East. Looking at the situation "coldly," Nixon concluded, Moscow knew "as well as we know around the NSC table" that the likelihood of US action against the Soviet maneuver was "in doubt." Of course that did not use to be the case, Nixon recalled. Eisenhower's decision to invade Lebanon in 1958 had been undertaken precisely to make clear that there should be no "doubt" about America's will to oppose Soviet encroachments.[41] Now, US weakness was on display.

While the strategic significance of the Middle East was far greater, the symbolic meaning of what was happening concurrently in Cuba was much more troubling. Intelligence indicated that the Soviets were building a submarine tender at Cien Fuegos in

[40] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

[41] 166. Editorial Note, FRUS, December 11, 1969–July 28, 1970.

violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the agreements made between Kennedy and Khrushchev in 1962. Neither Soviet motivations for the seemingly duplicitous and provocative action nor the actual strategic implications of a submarine base in Cuba were entirely clear. Perhaps Moscow viewed it as a potential bargaining chip in forthcoming SALT talks, or maybe the Soviet Union reasoned that the base differed little from what the United States was already doing. While Khrushchev's 1962 efforts would have changed the strategic balance, the consensus was that in a new world of parity the strategic benefits of the submarine base would be minimal.

Regardless of the proximate strategic ramifications, the pattern in which this Soviet move was interpreted suggested an ominous course. Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard viewed it as part of a long-range "building of power." DCI Richard Helms agreed, pointing out that the Soviets were expanding into the Indian Ocean as well, while the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Thomas Moorer raised the possibility that the Cuba move was the prelude to a possible facility in Chile where communists had recently triumphed in elections. A paper prepared by Moorer left no doubt where the JCS stood on Cien Fuegos:

> [The base] was the latest in a series of moves that appear to fit into a pattern which indicates increasing Soviet hostility toward the United States and a willingness to take greater risks in pursuing objectives inimical to the security of the United States.

Cien Fuegos was but the "latest and most serious challenge." After laying out twelve separate examples that constituted evidence of the Soviet pattern of aggression including the growth of its strategic power, expansion of its naval presence around the globe, and the rise of pro-Soviet regimes, the JCS paper concluded that the US nuclear deterrent was only credible "in extremis." The Soviets were "boldly pursuing more aggressive

policies" in the Middle East, Indian Ocean, and Western Hemisphere. Whatever diplomatic cooperation the Soviets expressed interest in, the fact remained that they were simultaneously expanding their military capability "across the board." If the United States did not now "toe the line" drawn during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviets would mistake US acquiescence for weakness and even seek to build other bases in the western hemisphere.[42]

Kissinger shared the JCS assessment that a broader pattern could be divined. Concluding that Cien Fuegos base would only "marginally" affect the nuclear balance of power, he argued that the Soviet logic appeared "puzzling." Why would Moscow run such a risk for marginal military gain? The only reasonable conclusion, Kissinger decided was that the Soviets were probing the limits of American tolerance. It was a political rather than military challenge. The Soviets were undertaking a "test of expansionism." By seeking *"piecemeal"* gains, Moscow could avoid major crises while in the aggregate demonstrating that the correlation of forces had shifted significantly since Khrushchev's humiliating retreat in 1962. Coming just weeks after Communist sympathizer Salvadore Allende was elected President of Chile, the expansion of Soviet naval power was "likely" to be viewed in Latin America as "a sign of US weakness." Radical leftists would be emboldened and their opponents cowed. Latin American countries would be forced to "hedge their bets" by drifting toward neutrality or moving even closer to Moscow. Elsewhere around the world, American acquiescence would result in a similar pattern. A Soviet success in Cuba would invariably be viewed as an "important index of the balance

[42] 211. Paper Prepared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Moorer)1 Washington, undated. Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, Volume XII

of power." In 1962 Khrushchev had blinked. If the United States now blinked, the world would find "clear evidence of the decline in our power and will." "*In short*" Kissinger concluded, "*this is a calculated but highly significant political challenge.*"[43]

The subtext of this challenge was disturbing. The Soviet move did not technically violate the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreements from 1962—which were never a formal set of obligations anyway. Nevertheless it was not difficult to conclude that Moscow's current maneuvering at least violated the "spirit" of the 1962 diplomacy, and their willingness to disregard past de facto agreements in Cien Fuegos and the Middle East were "symptoms of the mood" in Moscow. It seemed clear to Kissinger that the Soviet leadership assessed the Nixon administration with "ominous contempt." They saw the United States as "complacent" and unlikely to react "quickly or vigorously" to Soviet probes that were becoming increasingly bold. While unsure why the Soviets viewed the United States vulnerable to such tests, Kissinger speculated that Moscow's calculation were perhaps related to "our excessive eagerness" to pursue arms control talks or their assessment of the "domestic effects of Vietnam" or their "distorted views of our social-economic 'crisis.'" Regardless, the patterns of Soviet aggressiveness in the Middle East and Cuba were undisputable and the challenges would not stop until Moscow received "clear and unmistakable warning signals."[44]

The First Domino

[43] 212. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, September 22, 1970. Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, Volume XII.

[44] Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, September 22, 1970. Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, Volume XII. Doc. 212. Much of Kissinger's analysis was drawn from an NSC staff paper prepared the same day. Of note, Kissinger highlighted and checked the assessment of Soviet perceptions of America's domestic weakness in the staff paper. See 213. Memorandum Prepared for the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) 1 Washington, September 22, 1970, ibid.

If the problem of parity demonstrated the shortcomings of very real relative declines in capability, and the pattern of abuse suggested that Soviet perceptions of American weakness were already encouraging further aggression, then domestic divisions would confirm that America's will to resist had been enervated—especially by the Vietnam debate. Thus, the domestic story was the third leg of the triad.

Because of the disillusionment caused by the war in Vietnam and America's failures at home, Nixon and Kissinger found a temporarily hospitable audience for their efforts to "de-ideologize" international politics. Indeed, the Vietnam War represented an unprecedented opportunity to reorient America's approach to the world. The Wilsonian impulse, the Kennedy spirit, and the entire concept of an exceptional American mission were almost completely discredited. [45] Such a condition put Nixon and Kissinger in a position that two generations of self-avowed American "realists" could only dream about: to transcend the mythology of American exceptionalism and excise the pernicious "legalist-moralist" ideology that they believed had so paralyzed the construction and implementation of sound and sane foreign policy and led to tragic miscalculations like the escalation in Vietnam. However, in order to usher Americans toward understanding the world in harsh geopolitical terms, they needed to convince the country that the enterprise was worthwhile. To accomplish that, they concluded that the country needed "peace with honor" in Vietnam. Without it, policymakers could not conduct foreign policy on the basis of what Nixon called "cold" calculations because the people would turn against their government. Simultaneously, whatever domestic debate ensued could only convey an image of weakness abroad.

[45] The ideological debates precipitated by the Vietnam War about America's role in the world are the subject of Chapter I.

Kissinger spoke frequently and at length about the interpenetration of domestic and international forces at play. It was clear that his geopolitical calculations were shaped by his perception of domestic forces.[46] "Of course," he explained, ending "domestic disharmony is a very major objective of our entire policy." The goal was to end the divisive war as a "united people and with some dignity." If this could somehow be achieved, it would have "very profound significance" for the country, "So we admit this motive."[47] But if domestic calculations were important and American unity was important, why would Nixon, with Kissinger's encouragement, drag the war out for so long and thereby exacerbate domestic divisions rather than heal them?

Nixon and Kissinger feared what Kissinger called "our great American masochism."[48] If the United States did not achieve "peace with honor," domestic recriminations would paralyze the government and leave it unable to dissuade the Soviet Union from exploiting a distracted and weakened America for its own gains. As we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the administration believed it could offset or at least manage the immediate vocal protests against its escalatory bombing policies and decisions to invade Cambodia and Laos. However, the administration did not think its efforts to calibrate a balance of power in a world of de-ideologized international politics could survive the long-term domestic reaction that it presumed would follow an American failure in Vietnam. In short, Nixon and Kissinger were more concerned with hypothetical future domestic divisions than with the real divisions exacerbated by their own pursuit of peace with honor.

---

[46] See for example Kissinger's conversation with *Washington Post* editors. Memorandum for the Record, October 15, 1969. NSA Vietnam Collection, 1968-1975.
[47] State Department Bulletin, Check date January 26, 1972.
[48] Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger to Time-Life Dinner, May 4, 1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00479.

Kissinger persistently made the connection between the end of the war, the domestic milieu, and geopolitical prospects. Kissinger argued that the manner in which the United States ended its participation in the war was "crucial both for America's global position *and* for the fabric of our own society." A rapid collapse of the South Vietnamese regime traced to the American withdrawal would "seriously endanger" Nixon's effort to reorient America's role in the world. The impact on "friends, adversaries and our own people" would "swing" the US from its post World War II "predominance" to a post Vietnam "abdication."[49] The Nixon Doctrine could devolve into a pretext for isolationism under such pressure. The domestic ramifications, Kissinger warned, were "even more compelling" than the global impact. Ending American involvement in an "ignominious route" rather than with "dignity" would "leave deep scars on our society" fueled by recriminations and doubts about the sacrifices made and it would "deepen" the "already rampant crisis of authority" afflicting America.[50]

Kissinger did not even hide his concern with the domestic ramifications from the Soviets despite the fact that the principle reason he cared about the internal effects was because of the constraints he assumed such divisions would place on his ability to dissuade Soviet opportunism. "Anatoly" Kissinger lectured the Soviet ambassador, US problems in Vietnam were not just international, they had become a "major domestic problem. We cannot permit our domestic structure to be constantly tormented by this country 10,000 miles away."[51]

Kissinger's concern was easily understandable considering the protests and poisonous political climate engendered by American military involvement; however, it

[49] Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, Sept. 18, 1971, subj: Vietnam. In Kimball, p. 45.
[50] Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, Sept. 18, 1971, subj: Vietnam. In Kimball, pp. 45-46.
[51] Memorandum of Conversation, April 15, 1972. *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. XIV. Doc 104.

was not this short-term anti-Vietnam protest that concerned him most. It was the American peoples' reaction to losing the war that he feared. Without peace with honor, the presidency could not be insulated from domestic pressure to make international judgment and the domestic leg of deterrence would collapse.

This type of thinking was not exceptional to Nixon and Kissinger. In the late 1960s as vocal and very public pressure mounted within the United States to withdraw American ground forces from Vietnam, policymakers became increasingly wary of a potentially dangerous domestic mutation of the domino theory. Even as intelligence officials and the public more broadly poked holes in the well-worn Cold War thesis that defeat in Vietnam would send direct shockwaves throughout Southeast Asia and aftershocks throughout the world would undermine US credibility, focus turned to a much larger domino: America itself. It was America's own psyche that needed to be salvaged from Indochina.

Once it became apparent that the United States would have to pay an unbearable price to "win" in Vietnam, analysts and policymakers began to study the domestic consequences of an American defeat. In 1967, CIA Director Richard Helms had focused explicitly on the question and with clear alarm while reevaluating the Vietnam situation for Lyndon Johnson. Helms overall thesis challenged the dire prognostications of the conventional domino theory. However, in stark juxtaposition to his carefully worded discussion downplaying the regional and global effects of an unsatisfactory outcome in Vietnam, Helms analysis of the domestic consequences of failure was couched in fear and predicted cataclysm. According to Helms, one proposition "towers over all the above [geopolitical consequences] in importance." It was a factor which would have "more

decisive effect on the net result" of failure in Vietnam than "any other." What mattered most in Helms' mind was Americans' own appraisal of the meaning of the Vietnam experience and the future of America's role in the world. A "traumatic reaction"—from either the left or right wing—revealed by "deeply divisive national debate or by a feverish search for 'guilty' parties"—would compound whatever damage was directly done to the global balance by a policy failure.[52]

Events in Vietnam were not nearly as important as the significance ascribed to those events by outside observers. Unique in the history of great powers, Americans "live with open windows" and in the immediate aftermath of failure in Vietnam, Helms predicted that "a clamor of domestic quarreling and disarray might go far to fix the views of friends and foes abroad in a mistaken and ultimately dangerous mold." Conversely if, somehow, Americans displayed a "sober" and restrained reaction to events, so too would foreign "echoes" be "moderate" and thus the United States might stave off a dire geopolitical scenario. Both the domestic interpretation of a setback and the "impression others consequently formed of the likely subsequent course of American policy might finally prove as important as the event itself." Again in the conclusion of the memo he wrote that the "worst potential damage" would be of the self-inflicted variety that would shackle America's ability to effectively wield available power and distort the calculations of allies and adversaries alike about what the United States was prepared to defend and to resist.[53] The grave consequence of American failure could be mitigated if the United States projected an image of steadfast determination to meet its international obligations.

---

[52] Memo, "Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam, 9/11/1967. In *Selected NIE's on Vietnam*, NIC, pp. 393-426.

[53] Memo, "Implications of an Unfavorable Outcome in Vietnam, 9/11/1967. In *Selected NIE's on Vietnam*, NIC, pp. 393-426. These conclusions were largely formalized by the National Intelligence Council in NIE 50-68.

America's domestic scene was important to American credibility, and it was international impressions of the American reaction to failure in Vietnam that would impute meaning on those events and give rise to (or prevent) future tests.

Nixon and Kissinger believed that they needed to save America's role in the world from the self-destructive tendencies of the American people. Like well-intentioned, albeit naïve children, Americans were driven by idealism in their demands that the US end its involvement in Vietnam. The danger the administration foresaw, however, was that idealism easily morphed into infantile emotionalism that threatened to override long-term questions of the national interest. The administration could not bend to mass protests and moratoriums and unilaterally and unconditionally withdraw from Vietnam. However politically seductive, the "bug out" option portended grave national security challenges.

Nixon constantly highlighted the danger of the isolationist impulse reawakening. A quick exit from Vietnam and a communist victory, the President warned, would cause Americans to "throw up their hands" on further Asian involvement. Retreat from Southeast Asia, however, was the proximate not primary concern. What "really rides on Vietnam" the President argued was whether the American "people" were "going to play big role in the world or not." A sound policy in Asia was vital to ensure that isolationism did reassert itself and simultaneously that policy had to be conducted in such a way that the administration could "sell" it to the American people.[54] Why? Because, Nixon explained, "we are going through [a] critical phase for US world leadership." American had "never" wanted to be world leaders in the first place and now that impulse threatened

[54] 102. Memorandum of Conversation1Bangkok, July 29, 1969, 4 p.m.

to undue twenty-five years of careful statesmanship.[55] At stake, Nixon explained, was "the survival of the US as a world power with the will to use this power." Nixon feared the effect of defeat on the American people, who he warned "would never stand firm elsewhere," if Vietnam was lost. The problem, the President concluded, was the "confidence of the American people in themselves, and we must think in domestic terms."[56]

Kissinger sought to concede the errors of the past to conciliate critics of Vietnam policy. However, he always explained that the "anguish" felt by current opponents of the war could not distract responsible leaders from the possibility that they would also be responsible for the "anguish of the future." Contemporary peace advocates he acknowledged were driven by admirable idealism, however, if that idealism led to the abandonment of Vietnam, the global situation would be worse in the future. And for that, the administration and the nation's leaders would not be "forgiven" by citizens. "We cannot afford purity," he proclaimed of those wanting total and immediate withdrawal, "we must make peace." Future peace depended on cohesion at home, which was inseparable from credibility abroad. To admit to all those Americans who had paid a price in Vietnam that the government had been wrong was unthinkable. Likewise it was "not a trivial thing" to back away from the judgment of the four previous presidents.

Kissinger modeled Nixon's contemporary challenge on Charles DeGaulle. His goal was to end the Vietnam War in such a way that the United States did not tear itself apart from within. In Kissinger's reading of history, France's inspirational leader had guided his nation through the French defeat in Algeria "without tearing French society to

[55] 102. Memorandum of Conversation1Bangkok, July 29, 1969, 4 p.m.
[56] 137. Memorandum of Conversation,Washington, October 17, 1969, 4:49–5:45 p.m

pieces." In its present state, however, Kissinger felt that the US more closely resembled the French leadership collapse of the 1930s that emboldened Nazi Germany. According to Kissinger there was a "systematic attack on the whole structure of our leadership." Nixon would have to act as America's DeGaulle as he ended its military involvement in Vietnam while preserving the nation's sense of self-worth.[57] America must move toward domestic reconciliation, and its elite must help to educate and enlighten young people as "fathers" rather than "brothers." The "overriding concern" was to not further divide American society. Opinion makers and policymakers alike should seek to avoid compounding Americans malaise, bolster confidence in the nation's leadership, and ensure that the United States did not formulate global policies in response to "panic." Kissinger laid bare his thinking with remarkable candor, "Our government is now protecting many citizens from the consequences of what they propose."[58]

It would be impossible to lead the country toward a new structure of peace if the people turned against the government because it had led them into defeat in Vietnam. The war Kissinger argued, must be ended in such a way the "the greatest number of Americans can feel that they have had a sense of participation." In his view, "We believe it is important that it be ended as an act of governmental decision and not in response to demonstrations in the streets or other pressures." Long-term rather than short-term domestic calculations shaped their prespective and justified prolonging and expanding the war. Thus Kissinger explained that the administration supported the controversial invasion of Cambodia because "We felt that we had no choice but to resist some of the

[57] Memorandum for the Record of Remarks at the Council of Foreign Relations, November 12, 1969. NSA Vietnam Collection, 1968-1975.

[58] Memorandum for the Record of Remarks at the Council of Foreign Relations, November 12, 1969. NSA Vietnam Collection, 1968-1975.

types of pressures that were put on us, because we believe that the public will not forgive its leaders if the leaders produce a disaster even if the disaster is in response to seeming public pressure." After all, Kissinger said, Neville Chamberlain had 85% approval rating in 1938 when he declared "peace in our time" and 18 months later he was totally discredited. [59]

Fundamentally the objective of Nixon's policy was to end the war "under conditions that keep our country united and that give our people the sense that the suffering of the last seven years has not been entirely pointless."[60] Kissinger insisted that the "overwhelming problem" that the United States faced in Vietnam was "whether, in a seven-year war in which 45,000 Americans have died, the United States can be driven out of Vietnam by public pressure resulting from the frustration of the war." The United States could not "mock the commitments of the past." Regardless of the reasons for the original decision to intervene, the United States had to give South Vietnam a "reasonable chance" to defend itself." Could the United States really end its commitment "which began with the overthrow of a government, by the overthrow of another government?" Kissinger answered for himself. "No." This was essential not merely for American prestige abroad but for presidential authority "in the United States."[61]

From his perspective, the termination of American involvement depended only on a single condition: the United States "refused" only one North Vietnamese condition for peace—to "end the war by imposing a communist government." Kissinger was adamant

[59] Background Briefing with Henry Kissinger, October 12, 1970. NSA Vietnam Collection, 1968-1975.
[60] Background Briefing quoted in State Department Telegram, "Kissinger Background Briefing" December 1970. In NSA Vietnam Collection, 1968-1975.
[61] Memorandum of Conversation with Conservatives, August 12, 1971. NSA Kissinger Transcripts 00330.

that the administration would "refuse to join our enemies to defeat our allies."[62] This condition rather than the future of South Vietnam per se, was Kissinger's singular concern. "We want no permanent interests, we want out" he promised.[63] However, Kissinger was deeply concerned with the effect of South Vietnam on the United States. If it looked like the regime's destruction occurred with American complicity, then ccording to Kissinger, the impact on the "American psyche" would be "so severe and so tragic to our foreign policy it would be calamitous."[64] "What do you say them [the American people]," Kissinger asked a group of Ivy League presidents who had come to meet with him to express their concern over the May 1972 mining of Haiphong and bombing in North Vietnam, that "we did for the opponents what they couldn't do for themselves?" Kissinger could understand if Saigon fell from the weight of its own incompetence, but it was a completely different issue "if we brought it about by our action."[65]

Preserving the Theiu regime was but a means to an end—to provide space for the fiction that the United States' commitment—in blood, treasure, and prestige—to Vietnam had not been in vain. Repeatedly Kissinger made clear in private negotiations and conversations that the United States was not opposed to a communist regime in South Vietnam per se. Rather, it was opposed to the appearance (or reality) of the regime coming into power directly as a result of the American military withdrawal. The American people could not stomach such a reality and they would surely lash out by

[62] Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger to Time-Life Dinner, May 4, 1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00479.
[63] Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger to Time-Life Dinner, May 4, 1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00479.
[64] Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger to Time-Life Dinner, May 4, 1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00479.
[65] Memorandum of Conversation with Ivy League Presidents, 5/17/1972. NSA Kissinger Transcripts 00489.

turning against one and other their government. As Kissinger explained, "If as a country we keep our nerves, we are going to make it. Assuming the South Vietnamese don't collapse on us…"[66]

Kissinger frequently invoked the specter of right wing backlash to explain the Nixon Administration's approach to ending US involvement in Vietnam. "Peace with Honor" also meant peace without recriminations, peace without stab-in-the-back mythology, and peace without the resurgence of the type of crusading zealotry that had gotten the United States into Vietnam in the first place. Nixon needed the "silent majority" to win in Vietnam, but he also needed to win in Vietnam in order to ensure the silent majority did not voice its opinion in a fit of right wing backlash that would destroy the structure of peace.

Fritz Kraemer's analysis again supported the administration's predispositions. He argued that the real problem was not what was occurring abroad, but why it was occurring. America was retrenching because its leaders were kowtowing to public opinion, wedded to the belief that they were "helpless" to act against the will of the people. Whatever the "masses" believed today about foreign affairs and America's proper role in the world, they would nevertheless be quick to accuse the government of betrayal if US policy led to a disastrous defeat in Vietnam and crises "infinitely more terrible" than the Vietnam War would follow. "The people," Kraemer warned, "are not very just, they forgive the victor, but always make scapegoats of their own leaders who

[66] Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) Washington, April 15, 1972. *FRUS, 1969-1976*, Vol. XIV. Doc 105.

are not victorious. The Dolchstosslegende (the propaganda tale of the 'stab in the back' of the fighting troops) unfortunately can be invented in any country and at any time." [67]

Fear of the stab-in-the back made the preservation of a non-communist regime in South Vietnam vital to the preservation of American domestic stability. The communization of South Vietnam with US acquiescence would invariably lead Americans to question why their sons, fathers, and friends died in Vietnam if the national interest could tolerate the loss of Indochina. As Kissinger told a group of academic opponents of the war, "The problem is that we don't want the peace to divide the country as much as the war has done." Kissinger explained that the administration was in fact "protecting" the war's opponents because "there might be a right-wing reaction if the war were lost and all the sacrifice had been in vain."[68] He reminded his former brethren from the academic community that they were most definitely not in the majority on the Vietnam issue. The White House consistently received an "amazing" number of letters pleading that the president not let the thousands of American lives lost in Vietnam be in vain. Even given this requirement, the US goals for ending the war were limited—self determination for South Vietnam, and "compensation for the sacrifices already made, and continued American confidence in the US government." This minimal requirement, Kissinger said, went far beyond what even the Democrats had called for in their 1968 party platform, yet support from the liberal establishment, he lamented, had not been

[67] Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon. Washington, Undated [Oct. 7, 1969]. FRUS Vol. I, Doc. 39.

[68] Memorandum of Conversation with Princeton group, January 23, 1970. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00095.

forthcoming. Without at the very least understanding, Kissinger explained that the administration had had no choice but to turn to the "silent majority." [69]

Long after any strategic rationale could plausibly be found, the war in Southeast Asia continued to be fought for the reification of the American self-image. Elsewhere around the globe Nixon sought to build a structure of peace predicated on calculations of the national interest and undertook a substantial public relations effort within the United States to secure its support. On Vietnam, however, Nixon chose to indulge the supposed conceits of the emotional public that could not stomach the consequences of defeat. The "silent majority" needed to win in Vietnam. Without victory they would retreat into isolationism or worse seek out scapegoats within the country, attack the institutions of power, corrode the President's ability to conduct foreign policy, and ultimately undermine the national security through their own self-destructive tendencies.

Peace with honor meant that myths could be reenergized and faith in American righteousness reinvigorated, and the nation's psychic health restored. If the United States withdrew from Vietnam with its psychological resources intact, then, and only then could the equilibrium of power and by extension the structure of peace be secured. By indulging Americans in one last illusion—peace with honor—Nixon could begin the process of reorienting US foreign policy away from that very foundations of that illusion. America itself, rather than Southeast Asia was the domino Nixon and Kissinger were determined to prevent from falling. They—along with many others—worried that if the United States failed in Vietnam, America would tear itself apart—worse even then it already was doing—and then Soviet opportunism and non-communist realignments

[69] Memorandum of Conversation with Princeton group, January 23, 1970. NSA Kissinger Transcripts, 00095.

would be certain to follow. They would save Americans from themselves, and in so doing, unencumber American foreign policy to save the world from the certain chaos of a world without America's steadfast leadership.

Conclusion

Nixon and Kissinger's concerns with prestige, credibility, and the psychology of the balance of power were abstract—definitely hypothetical—but they were not obscure. The problem of parity, the pattern of abuse, and domestic division threatened to suck the United States into a vortex from which no statesman could extricate it. Facing such a scenario, ending the war in Vietnam on American terms took on a seductive logic. The path to nuclear annihilation (or American capitulation) was paved by seemingly disconnected and minor challenges to US prestige. If Nixon failed to disrupt the pattern of nicks and cuts and restore respect for America, then it was only a matter of time before the Soviets would be encouraged to overstep the bounds of "piecemeal" probes and take a decisive step that would necessitate a vigorous American response.

Yet any such response portended a crisis, and how could Nixon face down the Soviets in a crisis knowing that he no longer enjoyed an overwhelming strategic advantage and believing that public skepticism rather than support might result from his action? If the pattern of abuse was not arrested soon, the United States and the world would confront the problem of parity in very real terms. But how could Nixon stem the pattern of abuse abroad, if his hands were tied by domestic constraints—public, congressional, and bureaucratic? If the American people lacked the will and the president lacked the capability to confront Moscow in a crisis, then the Soviet Union

would have a free hand to use its military power to exert pressure and advance its political agenda, without worrying about the United States going to the brink.

If the United States did not act in Vietnam to secure the survival of the Saigon regime, it would be "humiliated" on the world stage and look like a "pitiful, helpless giant."[70] Adversaries would be emboldened and allies cowed, and "the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy" would threaten world peace. Anarchy was the antithesis of the "Structure of Peace," and the Soviet Union had to be convinced that the latter was preferable to the former. Likewise, Nixon warned, "If we fail to meet this challenge [in Vietnam]… all other nations will be on notice that despite its overwhelming power the United States, when a real crisis comes, will be found wanting."[71] Vietnam may not have been a "real crisis," but if the United States was "humiliated" there, confrontation would inevitably arise somewhere, and the United States would be forced into a situation that truly threatened to escalate out of control.

Winning Vietnam—which really meant not losing—was the knife that could cut Nixon's Gordian knot. Nowhere could the United States demonstrate better that the pattern of abuse had been stemmed than in Vietnam, and nothing would protect Nixon's domestic flank more effectively than ending the war with "honor." America's prestige secure and its self-image preserved, the superpower equilibrium could be maintained and a stable peace realized—even in a world of strategic nuclear parity.

[70] Nixon, Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia. April 30th, 1970. PPP, 139
[71] Nixon, Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia. April 30th, 1970, PPP, 139.