

Review article

Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and
Ford, 1969–1975

Part two: January 1972–January 1973

GEOFFREY WARNER

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On 20 January 1972 an alarming message reached Washington from General Creighton Abrams, the US commander in Vietnam. He stated that ‘the enemy is preparing and positioning his forces for a major offensive. There is no doubt that this is to be a major campaign ... We foresee a hard battle involving sophisticated weaponry and as much ground combat power as the enemy can generate.’ He therefore asked for a number of ‘standby authorities’ for military actions, notably air power. This was just the latest of a series of warnings from Abrams, but it was deemed important enough to be forwarded to the White House, where President Nixon’s National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, raised the matter with his boss later the same day. It was agreed that any decision upon future action should be postponed until after the President’s televised speech to the nation on Vietnam on 25 January (vol. VIII, no. 2).²

On 29 January 1972 Kissinger sent a memo to Nixon in which he set out Defense Secretary Melvin Laird’s views on Abrams’s requests and the conclusions of the National Security Council’s Senior Review Group (SRG) on the same subject. Regarding proposed attacks on North Vietnamese airfields, Kissinger wrote that such attacks ‘should be considered in the context of broader plans which should

¹ Both volumes can be consulted at www.history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v08 and [frus1969-76v09](http://www.history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v09).

² The North Vietnamese ‘Easter Offensive’, as it became known, had been planned at least as early as May–June 1971. See Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: the Vietnamese Communists’ perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 74. For Nixon’s speech on 25 January 1972, see Geoffrey Warner, ‘Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969–1975, Part one: January 1969–January 1972’, *International Affairs* 87: 6, November 2011, pp. 1505–06.

be developed for execution of larger scale strikes directed at logistics targets and S[urface to] A[ir] M[issile] facilities over limited time periods'. The purpose of this, Kissinger continued, was 'to limit the number of daily reports of attacks, thereby lessening the likelihood of a growing public relations problem', or, as he had more cynically put it to the SRG, 'our experience has been that you get the same amount of heat domestically for a four plane attack as you do for 400' (vol. VIII, nos 4 and 10).

At a meeting of the full National Security Council on 2 February, Nixon said that if the People's Army of North Vietnam (PAVN) offensive failed, it would have 'a massive effect' on it because it would have failed not so much against the United States as against the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), which it held in contempt. He added that 'the greatest miscalculation the North Vietnamese make is that we will pay, on our part, an exorbitant price because of the political situation in the United States', where opposition to the war was strong. 'That's not true', the President went on. 'Because there's one determination I've made: we're not going to lose out there.' 'If politics is what was motivating what we were doing', he continued, 'I would have declared immediately after I took office in January 1969, that the whole damn thing was the fault of Johnson and Kennedy. It was the "Democrats' War", and we're ending it like Eisenhower ended Korea, and we're getting the hell out, and let it go down the tube. We didn't do that ... because ... it would have been wrong for the country, wrong for the world ... but having come this long way and come to this point, the United States is not going to lose.'

Nixon emphasized that the upcoming presidential election in November 1972 did not deter him, for there were broader issues at stake: 'We have to be sure we don't lose here for reasons that affect China. They affect Russia. They affect the Middle East. They affect Europe. That's what this is all about' (vol. VIII, no. 13). Nevertheless, the President was obviously very concerned about possible domestic repercussions, for in a memorandum to Kissinger on 11 March 1972, he wrote that he would not be surprised if the Democrats soft-pedalled on troop withdrawals so that they could raise the issue and criticize the administration at the time of the Democrat convention in July 1972. It was 'vital', therefore, that before then 'we must make a final announcement of some type [concerning troop withdrawal] or we will be in very serious trouble' (vol. VIII, no. 38).

In a memorandum to the President on 14 March, Laird, who was the most enthusiastic supporter in the administration of 'Vietnamization'—i.e. the policy of handing over the conduct of the war to the South Vietnamese—opposed the reopening of the bombing campaign against North Vietnam which had been ended in 1968. There had been 'no flagrant provocation for renewed air attacks', he argued, and to change policy would heighten controversy over the war. Finally, he did not think that extending the war to the north would make much difference as most of the threatening PAVN forces were concentrated not in North Vietnam, but in the South, Cambodia and Laos (vol. VIII, no. 42).

When the North Vietnamese offensive began on 30 March, however, both Kissinger and Nixon enthusiastically embraced bombing the North and were

critical of both the air force and the navy for not carrying it out with sufficient vigour (vol. VIII, nos 50 and 52).

Indeed, by 3 April, Nixon was saying that, in a way, the PAVN offensive was ‘a godsend’ because ‘[w]e could give them tremendous punishment’. Kissinger agreed. ‘I think we could play this into the end of the war’, he said. ‘I think you’re right’, Nixon replied, but emphasized that the planned bombing attack on the enemy was the key. He wanted to know whether he should call in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, but Kissinger replied he only needed five minutes with Admiral Moorer ‘[a]nd just tell him you’ll accept no excuses, you want a massive effort’.³ He went on to say that ‘[i]f the ARVN collapses, we’ve done everything we can’, but Nixon interrupted him. ‘[T]hat’s a question that we can’t even think about’, he said. If the ARVN collapsed, ‘a lot of other things will collapse around here’. Kissinger hastened to agree with his boss. ‘I agree. That’s why we’ve got to blast ... the living bejeezus out of North Vietnam. We will gain nothing for restraint’. ‘Like I say,’ reiterated Nixon, ‘let’s don’t talk about, “Well, if the ARVN collapses we’ve done everything we can”’. Alluding to his efforts to reach a detente with the major communist powers, he added, ‘that’s fine with regard to this, but we’re playing a much bigger game. We’re playing a Russian game, a Chinese game, an election game ... and we’re not going to have the ARVN collapse’ (vol. VIII, no. 50).

The Russians were the largest supplier of arms to the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam (the DRV). Kissinger, therefore, sought to enlist their support in curbing the hostile actions of the latter. There is no American record of the conversation he had with the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, on 3 April, but, fortunately, we have the Russian one. Describing what he called ‘a large-scale invasion of South Vietnam’, Kissinger said that it was ‘all the more provocative’ because the United States had only recently informed DRV representatives that Kissinger was willing to renew the secret talks in Paris about a settlement of the conflict which had been broken off the previous September.⁴ Hanoi’s actions, he continued, were ‘not only an attempt to inflict a military defeat on Saigon’s troops in that area, but above all ... an attempt to put President Nixon personally in a difficult position, especially during the U.S. election campaign.’ The DRV, he said, could have achieved almost all of its objectives if it had agreed to wait a little, but that was not enough for its leaders; they wanted publicly to humiliate both the US and President Nixon, but the White House would not tolerate that. ‘[W]hen both sides have already invested so much effort in improving Soviet–U.S. relations,’ Kissinger claimed, ‘once again events in another part of the world are fatalistically interfering in the important process that has begun. Apparently we will have to go through yet another crisis that neither of us precipitated.’⁵

³ Both Nixon and Kissinger were critical of the US military’s allegedly sluggish response to the North Vietnamese offensive, particularly in the air. (See, for example, vol. VIII, nos 47, 50 and 52.) Admiral Moorer had to remind the President that it was he who had vetoed the request to bomb North Vietnam a few days earlier.

⁴ See Warner, ‘Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969–1975, Part one: January 1969–January 1972’, p. 1503, for the circumstances in which this occurred. ,

⁵ Dobrynin memorandum, 3 April 1972, Edward C. Keefer, David C. Geyer and Douglas E. Selvege, eds, *Soviet–American Relations: the detente years, 1969–1972* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office,

On the military side, things were moving too slowly for Nixon. Admiral Moorer told Admiral John McCain, the US naval commander in the Pacific, and General Abrams on 8 April that ‘the President was extremely out of patience with me this morning’, as he had wanted to use the heavy B-52 bombers against North Vietnam on 6 April, but so far nothing had happened. Abrams had suggested that the strikes in the North would not significantly affect the invasion, but Nixon ‘wants to give the North Vietnamese as well as the Soviets a clear message that he intends to use whatever force is necessary in the light of this flagrant invasion. He does not want to hear any more rationale—he wants action’ (vol. VIII, no. 71). He got it. On 16 April, Nixon told one of his closest advisers, H. R. ‘Bob’ Haldeman, that ‘the B-52 strikes were exceptionally effective, the best ever in the war. That the Pentagon was jumping up and down. We really left a good calling card. Now he’s knocking off the bombing while Henry takes his trip. We’ll see what they do from there.’⁶ The navy, too, was ready to mine and blockade North Vietnam’s ports at ‘very short notice’ (vol. VIII, no. 83).

The ‘trip’ in question was Kissinger’s scheduled secret visit to Moscow, to prepare for a summit meeting which would follow up the one he had had with the Chinese in February 1972. In what he called ‘a pretty candid talk’ with Kissinger, Nixon said that ‘we were really looking at ... a cancellation of the summit and going hard right on Vietnam, even up to a blockade’ and that, in these circumstances, he (Nixon) ‘had an obligation to look for a successor’. Kissinger was horrified, but Nixon said that if Kissinger stayed on, that would represent continuity in foreign policy. Kissinger then ‘became very emotional ... [and] made his pitch that the North Vietnamese should not be allowed to destroy two Presidents’.⁷ Later the same evening Kissinger said that Dobrynin was ‘still desperate’ to get him to Moscow and that Vietnam would be the first item on the agenda and the North Vietnamese foreign minister might even be present. The President reconsidered and said that Kissinger could go.⁸

In a further conversation between the two men on 19 April, Nixon declared: ‘Henry, we must not miss this chance. We’re going to do it, and I’ll destroy the goddam country [the DRV], believe me. I mean destroy it, if necessary. And let

2007), Document No. 279. According to this account, Kissinger exculpated the Soviet Union from any role in the North Vietnamese offensive; however, less than a week later, on 12 April, he had completely changed his tune. “Let’s be realistic”, he thundered at Dobrynin. “You are responsible for this conflict, either because you planned it or because you tried to score off the Chinese and as a result have put yourself into the position where a miserable little country can jeopardize everything that has been striven for years.” See *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume XIV, *Soviet Union October 1971–May 1972* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2006, no. 94). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this outburst is missing from the Russian record in *Soviet–American Relations*, no. 288.

⁶ H. R. Haldeman, *The Haldeman diaries: inside the Nixon White House* (New York: Putnam, 1994), p. 441.

⁷ Nixon’s predecessor, President Lyndon Johnson, had refused to run again for the presidency in 1968 because of the Vietnam War.

⁸ *The memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), p. 591. The quotation comes from an undated diary entry. In his memoirs—see Henry Kissinger, *White House years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 1121—Kissinger writes that this conversation took place on 15 April. This is confusing because Kissinger told Dobrynin that Nixon’s ‘inclination’ was to let him go to Moscow on the 14th (vol. VIII, no. 76, fn. 4), while the transcript of a taped conversation between Nixon and Kissinger on the 17th (vol. VIII, no. 81) reads very much like the ‘pretty candid talk’ described above. Kissinger was in Moscow from 20 to 24 April. Vietnam was discussed and the Russians agreed to pass American views on to the North Vietnamese (vol. VIII, no. 94).

me say, even the nuclear weapon if necessary.’ He hastily added, ‘it isn’t necessary, but you know what I mean’, and then went on to explain what he meant, namely that ‘[b]y—a nuclear weapon, I mean that we will bomb the living bejeezus out of North Vietnam, and then if anybody interferes we will threaten the nuclear weapon’ (vol. VIII, no. 88).

On 26 April, Nixon gave an address to the nation on Vietnam. It followed the pattern of his previous speeches on the subject, combining an account of the achievements of his administration,⁹ together with an exhortation of the North Vietnamese. The latter, the President stated, had launched a ‘massive invasion of South Vietnam’, violating the understanding they had reached with President Johnson in 1968 when he had stopped the bombing of the North in exchange for a pledge not to violate the demilitarized zone between the two countries. ‘More than 120,000 North Vietnamese are now fighting in South Vietnam’, the President said. ‘There are no South Vietnamese troops anywhere in North Vietnam.’ This ‘clear case of naked and unprovoked aggression’, he claimed, had been successfully resisted on the ground by South Vietnamese forces and a few South Koreans, although he had ordered US aero-naval attacks on the enemy in both North and South Vietnam. While he had also ordered the resumption of the Paris peace talks, he had ‘flatly rejected the proposal that we stop the bombing of North Vietnam as a condition for returning to the negotiating table. They sold that package to the United States once before, in 1968, and we are not going to buy it again in 1972.’¹⁰

Given the fact that the North Vietnamese had agreed to resume the secret peace talks in Paris, there was considerable discussion at a meeting on 28 April of the Washington Special Actions Group¹¹ about what the leading North Vietnamese negotiator, Le Duc Tho, might offer at his meeting with Kissinger on 2 May. The general conclusion was that he would probably offer nothing and that the war would continue, but more interesting were the remarks by Admiral Moorer, the State Department’s William Sullivan and Kissinger himself to the effect that if the North Vietnamese simply offered a ceasefire in return for the release of American prisoners of war and/or a complete US withdrawal, this would put the United States at a disadvantage. Referring to the DRV’s demand that President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam should be replaced before a ceasefire could occur, Sullivan went so far as to say that ‘[i]n a way, we can be saved by this dogmatic insistence [on the part of the DRV] ... If they change their position, though, we will be in trouble’ (vol. VIII, no. 101).

⁹ In January 1969 the number of US troops in Vietnam was 549,000 and casualties were running as high as 300 a week; 30,000 young Americans were being drafted each month. In April 1972, however, and despite the North Vietnamese invasion, the number of troops would be 69,000 by the end of the month and a further 20,000 would be withdrawn during the next three months. Casualties had been reduced by 95 per cent and draft calls averaged only 5,000 a month.

¹⁰ The full text of the speech may be found on the website of the American Presidency Project at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3384&st=&stl=> (accessed 6 Nov. 2013).

¹¹ This was an interdepartmental subcommittee of the National Security Council which dealt with contingency planning and crisis management. It was another item in Kissinger’s toolbox to help him maintain control over foreign policy-making.

While the war was going well for the North Vietnamese, however, there was little danger of a negotiated settlement. On 1 May the provincial capital of Quang Tri fell to the PAVN. Following some optimistic progress reports (vol. VIII, nos 93, 98), General Abrams's tone abruptly changed: 'In the light of the [South Vietnamese] leadership problem', he wrote, 'there is no confidence that Hue and Kontum [two other provincial capitals] will be held.' He went on: 'I must report that as the pressure has mounted and the battle has become more brutal the senior military leadership has begun to bend and in some cases to break ... [i]t is losing its will and cannot be depended on to take the measures necessary to stand and fight' (vol. VIII, no. 105, fn. 3). A Pentagon assessment struck an even more pessimistic note. It argued that there was 'no way' in which a military victory could be attained without American troops on the ground in South-East Asia and possibly in North Vietnam itself; and 'no way' to effect a change in the present campaign by bombing the North because the diversion of resources would only lead to an increased risk in the South. Such extreme measures as mining the DRV's harbours, bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, and destroying dams, dikes and locks, while they '[m]ight have some popularity in [the] US temporarily', would most likely lead to 'disdain and rejection since [the] impact is not much on [the] war, but rather on [the] civil populace'. Victory could only be won on the ground in the South and there were '[n]o discernible US interests or objectives that justify going further' (vol. VIII, no. 108).¹²

In the circumstances it was hardly surprising that, following Kissinger's meeting with Le Duc Tho and his assistant, Xuan Thuy, in Paris on 2 May, he reported to Nixon that it was 'thoroughly unproductive on substance ... They made very clear that they were not prepared either to deescalate the fighting or offer anything new concerning a settlement' (vol. VIII, no. 110).¹³ The President's immediate reaction was to up the ante by increasing the pace of the bombing and to cancel the summit with the Russians before the latter did so.¹⁴ On 4 May, however, Nixon changed his mind about both. He was greatly influenced by both Kissinger and his Treasury Secretary, John Connally, who, despite being a Democrat, was easily the most influential member of the President's cabinet. It was decided to plan for a blockade, in addition to increased bombing because, in Kissinger's words, it 'would in some ways be a less aggressive move than the bombing, although it would be a stronger signal ... and would do us more good'. As for the summit with Russia, Connally stated that 'he felt very strongly that under no circumstances should we cancel and then bomb the North, that people want the Soviet Summit, and ... if it's going to be cancelled we should let the Soviets cancel it.'¹⁵

¹² The FRUS editors believe that the author of this document was probably Brigadier-General Robert Pursley, Laird's military assistant, whom Nixon contemptuously dismissed as the Defense Secretary's 'peacenik general' (vol. VIII, no. 50, p. 164).

¹³ A detailed record of the discussion is in vol. VIII, no. 109.

¹⁴ See Nixon's contemporary diary entry in *The memoirs of Richard Nixon*, p. 600. Presumably Nixon felt that the Russians might cancel the summit because of the bombing, while he could claim that they were responsible for supplying the bulk of the military equipment which had made the DRV's Easter Offensive possible.

¹⁵ There is no official record of the meeting. The quotations come from two different versions of Haldeman's diary, viz. Haldeman, *Diaries*, pp. 453-4; and extracts from the fuller, multi-media edition of the diaries in vol. VIII, no. 120.

At a formal meeting of the National Security Council on 8 May it was decided to go ahead with the blockade, including mining. Fittingly, as the strongest supporter of Vietnamization in the administration, Laird opposed it on the grounds that the solution lay in the hands of the South Vietnamese. In the words of a note passed by Kissinger to his deputy, Brigadier-General Alexander Haig, during the course of the meeting, Secretary of State William Rogers's line was, 'If it works, I'm for it; if it fails, I'm against it' (vol. VIII, no. 131).¹⁶

Nixon announced the decision to the nation on television the same evening. 'All entrances to North Vietnamese ports', he said, 'will be mined to prevent access to these ports ... [and] United States forces have been directed to take appropriate measures within the internal and claimed territorial waters of North Vietnam to interdict the delivery of any supplies. Rail and all other communications will be cut off to the maximum extent possible. Air and naval strikes against military targets in North Vietnam will continue.' These measures, he explained further, 'will cease when the following conditions are met: First, all American prisoners of war must be returned. Second, there must be an internationally supervised cease-fire throughout Indochina.' Once these two steps had been taken, 'we will stop all acts of force throughout Indochina, and at that time we will proceed with a complete withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam within 4 months.'¹⁷ Because of their subsequent importance, two facts should be noted about the contents of this speech: first, Nixon had not cleared his peace offer with President Thieu (vol. VIII, no. 134); and, second, the offer did not include insistence upon a withdrawal of PAVN troops from South Vietnam.

Despite earlier fears that the US–Soviet summit might be cancelled, it went ahead between 22 and 30 May in Moscow. In a conversation with the Russian Foreign Minister, Andrei Gromyko, on the 27th Kissinger dangled the prospect of a coalition government in South Vietnam in the period between American withdrawal and South Vietnamese elections. When Gromyko asked who would prepare these elections, Kissinger replied that it would be '[a]n electoral commission in which the South Vietnamese Communists, in their guise as the Provisional Revolutionary Government [PRG], the established Government of the Republic of South Vietnam (GVN), and other forces in the country would have equal representation'. He then gratuitously added that 'the election commission is very close to a government of national concord proposed by the PRG. Therefore, one possibility is to give more power to the electoral commission and therefore give a de facto status in some areas to the national concord idea.' Pressed further by Gromyko, Kissinger said that while the United States would not leave Vietnam 'in such a way that a Communist victory is guaranteed ... we are prepared to leave so that a Communist victory is not excluded'. That information, he added, could be communicated to the North Vietnamese (FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. XIV, no. 290). Yet President Thieu had told a CIA agent on 17 May that the most the GVN could

¹⁶ See also Nixon's diary entry, *The memoirs of Richard Nixon*, pp. 603–604, and Alexander Haig (with Charles Cary), *Inner circles: how America changed the world* (New York: Warner, 1992), p. 287, whence the quotation.

¹⁷ The full text of the speech may be found at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index/index.php?pid=3404&st=&stl=> (accessed 7 Nov. 2013).

accept in any peace deal was 'new elections. It could not agree to the setting up of a coalition government' (vol. VIII, no. 171).

Kissinger's comments were doubtless relayed to the North Vietnamese on the occasion of a visit by Nikolai Podgorny, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, to the DRV from 15 to 20 June (FRUS, 1969–1976, vol. XV, no. 4), and one wonders to what extent this influenced the Hanoi Politburo's decision at the end of June/beginning of July to switch 'from a strategy of war to a strategy of peace'.¹⁸ Of course, other factors may have had as much, if not more, influence. According to a report by the British counter-insurgency expert, Sir Robert Thompson, submitted to Nixon on 15 July, 'the North Vietnamese offensive had been militarily defeated and has caused little damage to the Vietnamization and Pacification programs' (vol. VIII, no. 203), while the North Vietnamese themselves admitted that their opponents still controlled all the cities and two-thirds of the population and had not been defeated in the field. At the same time, both their major allies, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China wanted a settlement. Finally, the period from July to November was critical in the US electoral cycle and offered the best chance of an agreement.¹⁹

There was no sign of such an agreement at Kissinger's next meeting with Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy on 19 July, although he reported that 'their non-polemical approach and ambiguous positions ... are compatible with serious negotiations' (vol. VIII, no. 211). Indeed, he described the second meeting in the sequence, on 1 August, as 'the most interesting session we have had' (vol. VIII, no. 225). The President, however, was not greatly impressed. Haig told Kissinger after the third meeting, on 14 August (vol. VIII, no. 237), that Nixon thought that the negotiations were going nowhere and would 'only raise expectations which by October will not have been realized and consequently could result in intensified disillusionment which peaks off at a critical juncture in the [electoral] campaign' (vol. VIII, no. 240).²⁰

The influence of American domestic politics, as well as Nixon's global preoccupations, continued to hang over the negotiations. On 14 September, Haig sent the President a memorandum setting out new proposals which Kissinger wished to put before the North Vietnamese at their next meeting on the following day. The last substantive issue, which required the President's approval, concerned the role of the 'Committee of National Reconciliation' which would run the elections in South Vietnam after a settlement. The US wanted this committee to consist

¹⁸ Ang Chen Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 102.

¹⁹ Ang Chen Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*. The 'electoral cycle' had resulted, on 12 July, in the adoption of George McGovern as the Democratic Party's candidate for president. General Haig's view, expressed in a memorandum to Kissinger on 28 June, was that 'we must be very, very wary of the strong possibility that Hanoi has been in close touch with McGovern or McGovern elements, that a deal has been worked out through which the Democratic Party will be able to achieve credit for the settlement and that we will be standing with egg on our face in November because both the Democrats and Hanoi and their friends throughout the media will portray the breakthrough as coming directly from McGovern's pressure on the Administration'. The present author has seen no evidence of such collusion, but it is true that McGovern's position on the war was infinitely more sympathetic towards the DRV than that of President Nixon.

²⁰ Haig attributed Nixon's pessimism to the influence of Connally who, although he had retired as Secretary of the Treasury on 12 June 1972, still had the President's ear.

of representatives from the South Vietnamese government, the National Liberation Front (which controlled the communist insurrection inside the country) and neutralist elements, but the South Vietnamese government believed that this might set a precedent for a subsequent tripartite coalition government. Kissinger put up various arguments against this possibility, but conspicuously failed to mention that he himself had suggested to the Russians back in May that such a committee could indeed evolve into a coalition government (vol. VIII, no. 259).²¹

Haig told Kissinger, who was then in Moscow, that Nixon was ‘extremely reluctant’ to accept the proposal. He based his reluctance on the fact that he had just received the results of a poll which showed that the American people were two-to-one against any coalition with the communists and was ‘totally unimpressed’ by the need to come up with something new. Haig, however, succeeded in talking him round by emphasizing ‘the importance of maintaining credibility with Peking and Moscow’, although Nixon ‘insisted’ that ‘the record you establish tomorrow ... be a tough one which in a public sense would appeal to the hawk and not to the dove’ (vol. VIII, no. 260).

The meeting on 15 September did not in fact reach any conclusion (vol. VIII, no. 263). Nor did those on the 26th and 27th (vol. VIII, no. 267). The principal stumbling block in the negotiations was, in fact, the composition of the body to supervise the post-settlement elections in South Vietnam and its most strenuous opponent was the South Vietnamese President, Nguyen Van Thieu (vol. VIII, no. 258). In Kissinger’s mind, this reflected a broader purpose. ‘The real point’, he told Nixon on 29 September, ‘is that our interests and his [Thieu’s] are now divergent. We want out. We want our prisoners ... We want a cease-fire. He wants us in. He thinks he’s winning. And he wants us to continue bombing ... [f]or as long as needed’ (vol. VIII, no. 270).

In a further discussion, which took place later on the same day and at which Haig was also present, the President said that Thieu had ‘to realize that this war has got to stop ... We cannot go along with this sort of dreary business of hanging on for another four years. It’s been too long.’ It had already been decided that Haig should go to Saigon in order to persuade Thieu to moderate his opposition and Nixon told him that ‘I want you to get across to him [Thieu] ... that he can’t just assume that because I win the election that we’re going to stick with him through hell and high water ... We’ve got to get the war the hell off our backs in this country. That’s all there is to it.’ The President said that the House of Representatives, the Senate and the media were against him, and the students had rioted. In the circumstances, he wanted something from Thieu in return (vol. VIII, no. 271).

Haig, who was in Saigon from 1 to 4 October, originally thought that he had achieved ‘the reestablishment of mutual confidence and respect on both sides’ (vol. VIII, no. 276), but following a final lengthy meeting with Thieu and his advisers on 4 October, his optimism had vanished. To proceed with the US proposals for a settlement, he reported, ‘will or could well bring about the collapse of Thieu’s government’ (vol. VIII, no. 278). Nixon was furious. ‘When you stop to think

²¹ See above, p. 191, vol. XIV, no. 290.

of what we've done for him [Thieu]', he said in a telephone conversation with Kissinger, 'Jesus Christ, he owes us one now and he owes it damn fast' (vol. VIII, no. 279).

The President's written communication to Thieu on 6 October was, however, more emollient. While he agreed that there were 'serious disagreements between us', he wrote, they were 'tactical in character and involve no basic difference as to the objectives we both seek—the preservation of a non-Communist structure in South Vietnam which we have so patiently built together and which your heroic leadership has preserved against the most difficult of trials'. He therefore gave his South Vietnamese counterpart his 'firm assurance that there will be no settlement arrived at, the provisions of which have not been personally discussed with you well beforehand' (vol. VIII, no. 282).

After four more meetings with Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy (vol. IX, nos 3, 5 and 6), Kissinger returned to brief Nixon on the evening of 12 October. Referring to agreements concluded with China and the Soviet Union, he proclaimed: 'Well, you got three out of three, Mr President'. 'You got an agreement?' replied the astonished President. 'Are you kidding?' Kissinger said that he was not. A ceasefire had been agreed which would go into effect on 30/31 October, after which the United States had two months to withdraw its forces, although it could continue supplying South Vietnam with weapons. The ceasefire would coincide with the beginning of the release of prisoners of war in a process which would take about 60 days. The United States would also provide reparations for the reconstruction of North Vietnam. Surprisingly, perhaps, Nixon did not object. As he put it on 12 October, 'The fact is we did it with the Germans. We did it with the Japs, why not for these poor bastards?' (vol. IX, no. 9).²²

President Thieu, however, was no more enthusiastic about the proposed settlement than he had been when Haig visited him earlier in the month.²³ This time it was Kissinger who unsuccessfully sought to win over the South Vietnamese leader on a personal visit to Saigon later in October (vol. IX, nos 27, 32, 36, 41–3, 48 and 58). Thieu's obduracy infuriated both Kissinger and Nixon, but George Carver, the Special Assistant for Vietnamese Affairs in the CIA, could see that there were some major flaws in the agreement. '[F]rom the standpoint of allied interests', he wrote on 30 October, 'the present draft has two sets of serious defects.' In the first place, '[o]verall and throughout, there is a basic imbalance: the responsibilities and performance obligations of the allied side, particularly US, are spelled out with far greater clarity, precision and rigor than the Communist side's responsibilities and performance obligations, especially Hanoi's'. While US commitments in such key areas as troop withdrawal, non-interference and acceptance of future political developments were 'explicit and reasonably concrete', those devolving on the

²² Nixon reminded his audience that in his address to the nation on 14 May 1969 he had said that '[w]e have been generous to those whom we have fought. We have helped our former foes as well as our friends in the task of reconstruction. We are proud of this record, and we bring the same attitude in our search for a settlement in Vietnam'. See the full text of the speech at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=2047&st=&stl=> (accessed 28 Nov. 2013).

²³ See above, p. 193, vol. VIII, no. 278.

DRV were ‘generally couched in broad language that is allusive or elliptical, vague and often ambiguous’. This meant that American obligations would be ‘a relatively easy matter to check’, while Hanoi’s would be ‘far harder’.

‘Secondly’, Carver went on, ‘there are four areas in which the language of the present draft would cause (and clearly has caused) legitimate concern to the GVN and should cause similar concern to us’. The first of these was the continued presence of some 200,000 hostile North Vietnamese troops on South Vietnamese soil. The second concerned the proposed Council to supervise the elections. While the US regarded this as ‘a figleaf to mask a major North Vietnamese concession involving Hanoi’s virtual abandonment of the political plans of its southern organization’, party cadres in the South were being told something quite different, and, indeed, the DRV’s Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong, had described it in an interview as a ‘three-sided coalition of transition’.²⁴ Thirdly, ‘[t]he language on reunification ... may strike us, and the rest of the world, as “motherhood language”, whereas [t]he GVN, with reason, will probably regard the present language as a cunningly baited trap; for if strictly and literally interpreted, that language eliminates any South Vietnamese government’s right to exist.’ The fourth and final area of concern was the provision for inspection and enforcement. Carver pointed out that the International Control Commissions which had policed the Geneva Accords of 1954 in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia had suffered under the twin limitations of restriction of their freedom of movement and the need to reach decisions unanimously. ‘Both of these flaws’, wrote Carver, ‘are repeated in the language of the current draft’ (vol. IX, no. 84).

Nixon won the presidential election on 7 November by a landslide, obtaining 60.7 per cent of the popular vote as opposed to 37.5 per cent for his opponent and carrying every state apart from Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.²⁵ Following his victory, he wrote to Thieu on the 8th, promising to try and obtain additional concessions from the North Vietnamese, with regard not only to the National Council, but also to the continued presence of PAVN troops in South Vietnam (vol. IX, no. 96). It was clearly thought that Haig would be a better envoy on this occasion than Kissinger,²⁶ but he achieved only limited success (vol. IX, nos 97, 99–100, 103 and 106), and in another letter on 14 November, Nixon warned the South Vietnamese President that if the United States and the Republic of Vietnam were unable to reach agreement, he (Nixon) ‘would with great reluctance be forced to consider other alternatives’ (vol. IX, no. 107). What he had in mind was soon made clear. Kissinger was scheduled to meet with the North Vietnamese again during the following week and Nixon told him on 15 November that while he should try to get the best agreement possible with them, if Thieu refused to accept it, ‘we should ... go bilaterally with North Vietnam’ (vol. IX, no. 108).

²⁴ See the *New York Times*, 26 October 1972. Pham Van Dong was, of course, only echoing the language of Kissinger to Gromyko the previous May. See above, p. 191, vol. XIV, no. 290.

²⁵ Mitchell K. Hall, *Historical dictionary of the Nixon–Ford era* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. 73.

²⁶ See *The memoirs of Richard Nixon*, p. 718.

This tough message was relayed to the South Vietnamese delegates at the peace talks²⁷ in Paris on 24 November, when Kissinger told them that Nixon had sounded out the opinion of the leading Republicans and Democrats who supported him over Vietnam in the US Senate and the result showed that ‘they were not only unanimous but vehement in stating their conclusions that if Saigon is the only roadblock for reaching agreement ... they will personally lead the fight when the new Congress reconvenes on January 3 to cut all military and economic assistance to Saigon.’²⁸ In these circumstances, the US ‘would have no choice but to go it alone and to make a separate deal with North Vietnam for the return of our POWs and for our withdrawal’ (vol. IX, no. 125).

Nevertheless, Kissinger did attempt to negotiate some changes to the peace agreement with the North Vietnamese. Following a meeting with Le Duc Tho on 4 December, however, he wrote that Le Duc Tho ‘rejected every change we asked for ... There is almost no doubt that Hanoi is prepared now to break off the negotiations and go another military round’ (vol. IX, no. 139). He was right. As early as 8 November the DRV’s Politburo had raised the possibility of continuing the war and, at the end of the month, Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy reported that the US had changed the content of the agreement and reversed all the important issues, so that it could be said that everything had to be renegotiated.²⁹

Kissinger held further meetings with the North Vietnamese in early December (vol. IX, nos 144, 147, 151–2), but as Nixon wrote in his diary on the 9th, they ‘surprised him by slapping him in the face with a wet fish.’³⁰ The President had his own solution in mind. He had scaled back the bombing in North Vietnam when it looked as though a peace agreement had been reached, but on 5 December he was talking of ‘a very substantial increase in military action ... including the use of B-52s over the Hanoi–Haiphong complex’ (vol. IX, no. 141). Defense Secretary Laird strongly opposed such action. On 12 December he wrote to the President that there was ‘only one viable realistic choice’, i.e. ‘to sign the agreement now’, as ‘[a]ny further delay, or any action that increases US military involvement ... will destroy the remaining flicker of support you now have from both the Senate and the House [of Representatives]’ (vol. IX, no. 166).

Nixon’s mind, however, was made up. The memoirs of the President, Kissinger and Haig all suggest that the decision to launch Operation Linebacker II³¹ was taken at a meeting between the three men on 14 December.³² Kissinger states that ‘there seem to be no written records’ of the meeting, but there are more than 40 pages of a transcript of the recording of it in the documents under review (vol. IX,

²⁷ It will be recalled that in addition to the private talks between Kissinger and the North Vietnamese, there were also public sessions in which delegates from the GVN and the Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in South Vietnam also participated. These sessions were mainly used for propaganda purposes.

²⁸ Although Nixon had won a great personal triumph in the presidential election, more opponents of his policy on Vietnam had been elected to the Senate and the House of Representatives.

²⁹ Ang Chen Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, pp. 116–17.

³⁰ *The memoirs of Richard Nixon*, p. 731.

³¹ The earlier bombing campaign beginning in May had been christened Linebacker by the American football-loving President.

³² *The memoirs of Richard Nixon*, pp. 733–4; Kissinger, *White House years*, pp. 1447–8; Haig, *Inner circles*, p. 309.

no. 175) and they suggest that the decision had already been taken. In any event, the bombing began on the evening of 18 December, Vietnamese time.³³

There was an instant outcry from opponents of the war in the United States and throughout the world, with plenty of horror stories about the indiscriminate savagery of the American action.³⁴ How justified they were is another matter. The North Vietnamese anticipated the bombing and the authorities started to evacuate children from Hanoi as early as 4 December, while the Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, Malcolm Browne, a consistent critic of the war, wrote from Hanoi at the end of March 1973 that '[t]he damage caused by the bombing was grossly overstated by North Vietnamese propaganda'.³⁵

Whatever the truth, the bombing seems to have had the effect that Nixon desired, for on 26 December, in what Kissinger described as 'a terrific cave', the North Vietnamese proposed a private meeting on 8 January 1973 (vol. IX, nos 224 and 225). 'Now we go in and make the deal with the North', Nixon told a member of Kissinger's staff on 27 December, 'and tell the South to either stick it or stuff it' (vol. IX, no. 227, p. 842). Bombing above the 20th parallel was stopped on the 30th and 'a major breakthrough in the negotiations' was achieved at the private meeting between Kissinger, Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy on 9 January 1973 (vol. IX, no. 256). Further pressure was put on the still reluctant Thieu (vol. IX, nos 278, 290, 295–6) and in a letter to Nixon on the 21st, the South Vietnamese President gave his reluctant consent (vol. IX, no. 320).

On 23 January 1973 the President formally announced the initialling of the peace agreement to the nation, claiming that it would 'end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia'. The ceasefire, he said, would begin at 7pm, Washington time, on the 27th. During the course of the following 60 days, 'all Americans held prisoners of war throughout Indochina will be released', and 'all American forces will be withdrawn from South Vietnam'.³⁶

Nixon's approval rating soared to a record high of 66 per cent following the conclusion of the agreement,³⁷ but it was hardly the triumph which he proclaimed it to be. The official North Vietnamese military history of the war, for example, shows how justified President Thieu's concerns about the agreement really were. It was, the authors claim, 'a great victory for our people and a major defeat for the American imperialists and their lackeys'. This was because '[o]n the battlefields of South Vietnam the entire U.S. army of aggression and all satellite troops were forced to withdraw, whereas units of the People's Army of Vietnam were allowed

³³ A detailed account of Linebacker II may be found in Marshal L. Michel III, *The eleven days of Christmas: America's last Vietnam battle* (New York: Encounter, 2002).

³⁴ Tom Wells, *The war within: America's battle over Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 559–62.

³⁵ Ang Chen Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 118; *New York Times*, 31 March 1973. I owe this reference to Mark W. Woodruff, *Unheralded victory: who won the Vietnam war?* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 206.

³⁶ The full text of Nixon's address to the nation may be found at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=3808&stl=&stl> (accessed 24 Nov. 2013). The full text of the agreement may be found in Pierre Asselin, *A bitter peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the making of the Paris agreement* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2002), pp. 203–16.

³⁷ See the chart at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php?pres=37&sort=pop&direct=DESC&Submit=DISPLAY> (accessed 1 Dec. 2013).

to maintain their forces and positions in all strategic areas. As for North Vietnam, the American imperialists were forced to end totally and unconditionally their war of destruction using air and naval forces. The people of North Vietnam were able to rebuild and develop their economy and to concentrate manpower and material resources for the final battle to attain our goal of liberating the entire nation. The Paris Agreement allowed us to achieve our objective of keeping our forces and positions in South Vietnam intact so that we could continue to attack the enemy.³⁸

Both this article and its predecessor³⁹ have argued that both Nixon and Kissinger sought consistently to rid themselves and the United States of the albatross of Vietnam. Neither of them, however, felt that they could simply walk away without a fig leaf of respectability to cover the nakedness of their withdrawal. The agreement of January 1973 was that fig leaf.

³⁸ The Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: the official history of the People's Army of Vietnam 1954-1975* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), p. 333.

³⁹ Warner, 'Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969-1975, Part one: January 1969-January 1972'.