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Congress, the President, and the Battle of Ideas: Vietnam Policy, 1965-1969

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1.

Introduction

"This is a time of testing for our nation. The question is whether we have the staying power to fight a very costly war, when the objective is limited and the danger to us is seemingly remote."

Lyndon Johnson, 1967 State of the Union Address

When Lyndon Johnson and his holdover New Frontiersmen adopted tactics of attrition in Vietnam, they warped the debate over America's proper role in that country. They denied advocates of a sounder military strategy the chance to try their hand while Americans possessed the will to fight. As the conflict dragged on, skeptics--many were Democrats and hence constrained directly from attacking their party chief--instead developed a broader critique that would shatter the Cold War consensus. When Richard Nixon assumed responsibility for managing the war, he possessed perilously little margin for error. By 1970 it was clear, or should have been, that his "Vietnamization" policy would have to work fast if it was to work at all.

There emerged three responses to Hanoi's determined effort to unify Vietnam under Communist leadership. Hawks, including a majority of Republicans and a number of (often southern) Democrats, agreed that American boys should not fight Asian land wars. Americans should lend sea and air support, bomb the important economic and military targets that Johnson would not, cut the Ho Chi Minh trail, and, most of all, leave the ground fighting to the South Vietnamese. There was an obvious weakness in this prescription, and it would become more urgent later on: what would these hawks do if their Saigon ally proved unequal to its assigned task? For the time being, they received a pass on this issue.

Doves increasingly mated realist strategy to unrealistic tactics. Typically they called for bombing halts plus negotiations. This remained their line even when Hanoi used the "pauses" to step up its infiltration of the South and the talks to press for unilateral American withdrawal. It was, as their critics charged, a recipe for defeat. But, as the Johnson Administration repeatedly failed to justify its policies convincingly, the doves, with some justice, appropriated the language of international-affairs realism, and indeed the arch-realists George Kennan and Hans Morganthau, to their cause. In time, they also would turn toward the rising academic elite from which sprang the post-"Wise Men" thinkers who for better or worse make our foreign policy today. President Nixon eased their task by predicating his Vietnamization policy on South Vietnamese "self-determination." This left the realist field to Congressional doves, grouped around Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright of Arkansas.

Like the hawk argument, the dove position contained its share of convenient omissions. Most obvious was its utter failure to account for--or indeed more than glancingly to acknowledge--Soviet and

Chinese aid to Hanoi. Since they ultimately would judge Saigon's legitimacy by its ability to resist Northern aggression while maintaining the niceties of U.S.-style democracy, doves held America's ally to rather a high standard. Given that most Americans supported the war effort and continued to do so even into the Nixon years, the doves' ultimate triumph rests in no small part on the errors of their opponents. Lyndon Johnson's failure was one of imagination; Richard Nixon's was one of political misjudgment.

2.

The Altruist

"That man is good who does good to others; if he suffers on account of the good he does, he is very good; if he suffers at the hands of those to whom he has done good, then his goodness is so great that it could be enhanced only by greater sufferings; and if he should die at their hands, his virtue can go no further: it is heroic, it is perfect."

> Jean de La Bruyère (164596), French writer, moralist. Characters, "Of Personal Merit," aph. 44 (1688)

The Johnson Administration offered many justifications for its Vietnam policy, but together they fell short of a coherent whole. There was a contractual theory--the South Vietnamese asked us for help and we agreed. There were also the SEATO treaty, which the Administration chose to interpret as requiring U.S. military action, and the 1962 Geneva accords, read to the same result. At times, the President asserted that he acted in the name of self-determination and at others on behalf of "world order" although upholding that order assuredly did not make America the "world policeman." The United States acted alternately to block Communist gains or to adjust the balance of power within the Communist bloc. And always there was the "domino theory," or more precisely domino *theories*. Whatever resonance that hypothesis possessed--and it possessed a good deal in, say, 1965--would prove ephemeral when its proponents failed to identify with any consistency exactly which tiles were at risk.

Safely reelected, President Johnson in his 1965 State of the Union Address displayed his scattershot approach. The United States aided South Vietnam, he told the nation, "first, because a friendly nation has asked us to help against the Communist aggression. Ten years ago our President pledged our help. Three Presidents have supported that pledge. We will not break it now. Second, our own security is tied to the peace of Asia."(1) This formulation neatly conflated Eisenhower's limited dispatch of military advisors with whatever actions Johnson might find necessary, all under the rubric of "help." By asserting continuity with the last Republican administration, Johnson asserted a claim on bipartisan support. The President's priorities were telling. Help came first; American security second.

Six weeks after the 1965 State of the Union Address, on February 18, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara released his annual review of U.S. global defense policy. He added still more justifications for the American effort. A Hanoi victory would enhance China's status vis-à-vis the Soviet Union within the international Communist movement. By these lights, American intervention helped *Moscow*.(2) Nine days later, the State Department assured that American motives were pure; America sought "no territory, no military bases, no favored position."(3) Johnson, at a March 13th news conference, added that his government would help "any in Southeast Asia who ask our help in defending their freedom."(4)

In all of this American security interests seemed only to play a secondary role. At times, notably his September 1967 address to the National Legislative Conference, LBJ gave the security issues more emphasis, but the inconsistency did not aid his cause. When the administration did turn to matters of grand strategy, it offered the domino theory, but in any number of flavors. At times, as in McNamara's 1965 policy review, Washington seemed to acknowledge objections that the world was more complex. Saigon's fall would not *necessarily* doom its neighbors, but the consequences would be ominous nonetheless:

All of this is not to say that the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists would automatically mean the loss of all Southeast Asia. Yet, we may be certain that as soon as they had established their control over South Vietnam, the Communists would press their subversive operations in Laos and then in Thailand and we would have to face this same problem all over again in another place or permit them to have all of Southeast Asia by default.(5)

Johnson offered the quintessential formulation in his September 29, 1967 address at San Antonio:

I cannot tell you tonight as your President--with certainty--that a Communist conquest of South Vietnam would be followed by a Communist conquest of Southeast Asia. Your American President cannot tell you--with certainty--that a Southeast Asia dominated by Communist power would bring a third world war much closer to terrible reality. One could hope that this would not be so. But all that we have learned in this tragic century strongly suggests to me that it would be so.(6)

There always was a caveat to fall back on. We could not say "with certainty" the dominos would fall, but the evocative language intimated that catastrophe was but one defeat away. As Johnson put it at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, "Let no one think for a moment that retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to the conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. the appetite of aggression is never satisfied."(7) But acknowledging the hypothetical possibility that the dominos might not fall was no substitute for reasoned argument. Conspicuously absent from the Administration line were such considerations as whether a Communist Vietnam could project its power into Thailand or Burma or whether Ho's ensconcement in Saigon would augment or instead fragment the Communist bloc. Because Johnson failed to make the practical argument of power realities, his opponents would appropriate it.

In the 1967 State of the Union Address, Johnson also asserted that the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization treaty "committed" America to act against Communist action against Saigon.(8) The treaty text itself was not that clear, and the Administration would, when pressed, concede this. Secretary of State Dean Rusk's January 28, 1966 televised appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations committee illustrates:

Fulbright: You stated in your original statement that we have a very clear commitment. What is the origin and basis for a clear commitment to the action we are now taking in Vietnam?

Rusk: I think, sir, there are a combination of components in that commitment. We have the Southeast Asian Treaty to which South Vietnam was a protocol state.

Fulbright: What does that commit us to in that regard? This is where there is a good deal of confusion in my mind and I think in the public mind about the nature of that commitment. Does the Southeast Treaty, Southeast Asia Treaty Organization commit us to do what we are now doing in Vietnam?

Rusk: Yes, sir, I have no doubt that it does. A protocol state has a right to call on the members of the organization for assistance. The obligations of that treaty are both joint and several. That is, they are both collective and individual. So that there seems to be no doubt that we are entitled to offer that assistance.

Fulbright: You say we are entitled to do this. Are we obliged to do this under the treaty?

Rusk: I would not want to get into the question of whether--if we were not interested in the commitments, policy, and principle under the Southeast Asia Treaty--of whether we have some legal way in order to avoid those commitments. I suppose that one could frame some argument which would make that case.[(9)]

Over time, the Administration moved further toward the "nation building" justification. The 1967 State of the Union Address reduced international affairs to a matter of rights and desires. "We are there," Johnson told the nation, "because the people of South Vietnam have the same right to remain non-Communist--if that is what they choose--as North Vietnam has to remain Communist."[(10)] Addressing the Tennessee legislature two months later, he added such meliorist objectives as allowing the South Vietnamese to fashion their own institutions free from intimidation, to free Saigon's resources for the higher purpose of combating hunger, ignorance and disease, and to demonstrate concretely "that aggression across international frontiers or demarcation lines is no longer an acceptable means of political change."[(11)]

With the President offering these slippery congeries of rationales and at times seemingly calling for a fundamental recasting of international relations, it can hardly surprise that his policies generated opposition from both hawks and doves. Given the protean justification of Johnson's case, the issue arises as to *how* he could draw America so deeply into the morass. The President's ability to forestall opposition among Congressional Democrats is easily explained. He was, after all, the party leader and had led the Democrats to their smashing 1964 electoral triumph. Bulging congressional majorities had made possible liberal social legislation the likes of which had been inconceivable since the glory days of the Second New Deal.

At first, it seemed that the more serious opposition would come from Johnson's right. Most Americans and most of their elected representatives favored the war during the Johnson years. In the 1966 midterm elections, for example, "peace candidates" entered a number of primary battles. As *Congressional Quarterly* reported, "Though a handful ran well in California and New York, most were resoundingly defeated." The publication polled members of Congress and concluded that the 90th Congress would feature thirty more Representatives favoring a harder-than-Johnson military line.[(12)] It is well known that Johnson feared the loss of South Vietnam would unleash a right-wing backlash that posed a mortal threat to his planned Great Society. The price paid by Harry Truman and Dean Acheson for "losing" China would, said the President in characteristically pungent language, be [barnyared epithet deleted editor] by comparison. Johnson would later suggest that critics would not appear only on his right:

This time there would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam. That I had let a democracy fall into the hands of the Communists. That I was a coward. An unmanly man. A man without a spine. Oh, I could see it coming, all right.[(13)]

We turn first then to the Republicans and the Congressional hawks. The GOP developed its own critique of the Johnson line. It called for a more sustainable level of military commitment and

arguably promised a greater chance of military success. Republicans pressed their case with more vigor as time passed and as Johnson's military tactics became clear, but in truth the gloves never came off, at least not all the way. As a result, when they put one of their own in the White House, hawks and Republicans found that LBJ had frittered away much of the domestic consensus needed to give their policies a full and fair trial.

3.

Hawks and Republicans

"*Now so long as we have an opportunity to offer our substitutes, our alternatives, our opinions, our suggestions, and they're thrown around the table, and carefully discussed--when the decision is finally made, what to do in the interests of the unity of this country, because you cannot, and you dare not, present a dis-united front to a fevered world, you go along with the Commander-in-Chief.*"

--Senator Everett Dirksen, 11 January 1966[(14)]

Indochina bestowed upon Lyndon Johnson a host of political tormentors, but mostly he did not find them among the "loyal" opposition. This was not for want of provocation. Johnson had dispatched his 1964 GOP opponent as a nuke-happy warmonger and then dispatched half a million young Americans to the proverbial Asian land war. At home, he urged his swollen congressional majority to construct a Great Society that promised at taxpayer expense to empower the "poor," and presumably Johnson's Democratic party, politically.[(15)] And yet Republicans for the most part stood by the other guy's man. They did not stand by him completely of course, and they did so less over time, especially as the President's military strategy became clear. But, for a number of reasons, LBJ retained a fair measure of Republican Congressional support for his Vietnam policies.

One reason was that most Republicans also wanted to check Hanoi. They just disagreed with Johnson on how to do it. As the "out" party, the GOP could to a certain extent have it both ways, holding the President accountable both for the Asian dominos and for keeping American boys off the Asian mainland. The 1964 Goldwater platform tartly charged that the Johnson Administration

has encouraged an increase in aggression in South Vietnam by appearing to set limits on America's willingness to act--and then, in the deepening struggle, it has sacrificed the lives of American and allied fighting men by denial of modern equipment.[(16)]

Goldwater wanted a larger American commitment. By mid-1965, it was clear that he would get it. Toward the end of the year, however, it also grew clear that Johnson would not employ the military strategies that most Republicans and hawkish Democrats preferred. As LBJ ruled significant military targets out of bounds for American bombers and General William Westmoreland adopted his "meatgrinder" strategy, a rough division of labor took shape within the GOP. Republican legislators faced with floor debate and roll-call votes mostly supported the President while official Republican party organs criticized how Johnson fought the war.

In 1965, the GOP created the Republican Coordinating Committee, an umbrella organization representing its past presidential nominees, former President Eisenhower, congressional leaders, governors and state legislators.[(17)] Over the years, RCC released a flurry of position papers about U.S. foreign policy in general and Vietnam in particular. The critique that emerged bears considerable resemblance to the thinking behind Richard Nixon's subsequent "Vietnamization."

In June of 1965, as the dispatch of U.S. ground troops quickened, RCC called for "maintenance of a free and indigenous government of the entire territory of South Vietnam" but was less clear as to how Washington should maintain it, urging "that the United States undertake whatever measures are necessary to attain these objectives including a massive effort to encourage dedication by the people of South Vietnam to achieve their own freedom."[(18)] As the troop buildup grew, the RCC saw grounds in December to criticize the Administration. It warned of the growing danger of "an endless Korean-type jungle war. A land war in Southeast Asia would be to the advantage of the Communists." RCC called instead for a "Kennedy-type" naval blockade and maximum use of American conventional air and sea power against significant military targets.[(19)] In essence, the GOP would unleash the navy and air force while minimizing use of American ground troops.

By 1968, Republicans had fashioned a comprehensive critique of what they called military "gradualism." Johnson, RCC charged, had modified Kennedy's "flexible response"--which merely prescribed maintenance of military forces capable of containing all levels of aggression--into proportionate response:

Thus war is invited as aggressors measure attractive options--freedom to choose the time, the place and the means of doing battle, all with an acceptable risk. Assured that America's crushing force will be dribbled into battle, the military marauder is encouraged to believe that even a protracted conflict will be pursued on his terms. Moreover, after each carefully restrained escalation, gradualism dictates a 'pause.' This ingenuous stratagem is in effect a one-sided military recess during which the enemy is importuned to recalculate his risks and contritely review his indiscretions

Vietnam was "America's laboratory for testing the gradualism experiment." It provided Hanoi with time to strengthen its forces, including anti-aircraft defenses, preserve its sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos, and shift tactical decisions to "civilians 9,000 miles away in Washington."[(20)]

But these criticisms went to *how* the war was fought, not *whether* to fight it. We cannot know how the GOP would have reacted had Johnson simply wound down the U.S. commitment, but we do know that as long as the Democratic president elected to wage even a "gradualist" war, individual Republican members of Congress generally supported him, or at least kept feeding him political rope. Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen and his House counterpart Gerald R. Ford issued a February 17, 1965 joint statement supporting Johnson's policies and attacking Senate Democrats who urged a negotiated settlement.[(21)] Two days later, defeated nuke-happy warmonger Barry Goldwater weighed in. "At long last," the Arizona Senator asserted, Johnson was listening to his advice. "I join in backing 100 percent these actions of the President against the Communists."[(22)] In August, former President Eisenhower let his opinion be known. "When it comes to the current job," he said, "we must follow the President."[(23)] As the American deployment grew and LBJ's military strategy came into focus, some Republicans sensed an emerging issue. In November, for example, former Vice President Richard M. Nixon urged Johnson to step up air strikes and to "cut off the flow of supplies into North Vietnam."[(24)] But for the most part, the President could count on a good measure of Republican support.

The second reason Republicans stayed mostly on board was a tradition of foreign policy bipartisanship exemplified in the person of Senate Minority Leader Everett McKinley Dirksen. Early in his career, there was little to distinguish the young Illinois congressman from his isolationist Midwestern colleagues. He had, for example, voted against extending the draft despite the growing Axis threat. But on September 18, 1941, he told the House that President Roosevelt had adopted a pro-British policy and "That policy is now known to all the world. To disavow or oppose that policy

now could only weaken the President's position, impair our prestige, and imperil the nation."[(25)] Dirksen's bipartisan *bona fides* thus predated even those of Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, who helped reconcile the GOP to Democratic Cold War initiatives.

Dirksen's foursquare support of Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policies made it difficult for Republicans cleanly to break with the President, or to maximize politically their differences over how best to manage the war. In 1966, Dirksen offered the foreign affairs portion of the GOP "counter" State of the Union Address. It was an opportunity to lay out squarely the differences between Johnson and the hawks, to establish a measure of ideological cover should the President's policies fail. It would have been a difficult task, but Dirksen instead supported his President's policies and the rationales that underlay them. "We pledged ourselves to help a small nation. Our word was given," he told the television audience.

The Senate Minority Leader continued to hold back Republican efforts to attack Johnson more forthrightly. At times this would strain Dirksen's relationship with his House counterpart. Gerald R. Ford had in January 1965 displaced Charles A. Halleck of Indiana with the support of younger Republicans who sought more aggressive leadership that would be less comfortable with perpetual minority status. As a Halleck biographer concluded, "the struggle was not over conflicting ideologies. It was a battle of personalities, leadership techniques, and style. The two contestants had almost identical voting records."[(26)] Recalling the contest, Ford agreed with this assessment--his colleagues wanted a "unified and more aggressive Republican leadership."[(27)] Ford set about providing it by organizing "committees" of House Republicans to develop an intellectual response to the President's initiatives. One committee covered "planning and research," another "policy."[(28)] William Prendergast, staff director of the former, would contend that Dirksen disagreed with Ford on the need to develop an overall program. The Senator, he believed, was content with the status quo.[(29)] Subsequent events would suggest that Prendergast was right.

When Ford, speaking at Tonawanda, New York, on April 14, 1966, charged the administration with "shocking mismanagement" of the war, Dirksen took him to task.[(30)] He accused Ford of speaking without the requisite hard facts. "You don't demean the Chief Magistrate of your country at a time like this when a war is on."[(31)] The two quickly patched things up, but Dirksen continued to defend the administration. Replying to Bobby Kennedy's March 1967 peace plan (bombing halt; neither side to reinforce its position; negotiations; replacement of U.S. forces with an "international group") the Republican leader announced he was "entirely with" the President.[(32)]

Dirksen expended energy to keep Republican Senators in line, but as time passed the job grew harder. On May 1, 1967, the Senate Republican Policy Committee released a supposedly secret (Chairman Bourke B. Hickenlooper of Iowa feared partial "leaks") staff report entitled "The War in Vietnam." The report asserted that former President Eisenhower would have avoided the growing debacle. It summarized Ike's policies as :

(1) No American armies in Asia, no land war in Asia;

(2) No commitment to aid colonialism or to suppress nationalism in Asia;

(3) In any event, no unilateral military intervention; a resort to force only under some international sanction, in particular the U.N.;

(4) Any multilateral commitment to force should be in a specific area, for a specific, limited purpose in order to keep the conflict localized;

(5) Specifically in South Vietnam, the supplying of aid--money, supplies, arms--but not U.S. armies. [33]

Johnson, by contrast, practiced "Diplomatic Darwinism. By this is meant the President's insistence that whatever he may be doing is but part of a steady evolution from commitments made by earlier Presidents, particulary [sic] President Eisenhower."[34]

Dirksen left his hospital bed to put the best face on matters, pleading at a hastily arranged press conference for "foursquare" support for the President.[35] His support for the President continued throughout the year. On October 3, 1967, he debated Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright over the war. Addressing the charge from *Democrats* that Johnson's prosecution of the war had invaded the legislative domain, Dirksen first expressed his concern that "we do not try to invade the constitutional prerogative of the President of the United States." Admittedly Congress retained the power of the purse and hence the ability to "discipline virtually everything in government," but "we must not arrogate to ourselves the conduct of an external struggle." Dirksen here compared Johnson's critics to Confederate President Jefferson Davis, whose interference with Robert E. Lee was acknowledged by no less an authority than U.S. Grant as instrumental to the Union war effort.[36] The Republican espoused the domino theory in its purist form--with the fall of Southeast Asia, he said, "the whole Pacific coastline of this country will be exposed."[37]

It is of course easy to overstate Dirksen's influence. Republicans were far from a monolithic bloc. But the party's Senate leader naturally assumed the function of leading foreign affairs spokesman. Paired with House counterparts Halleck (the "Ev and Charlie Show") and later Ford in a variety of nationally televised appearances including "official" Republican responses to Presidential addresses, Dirksen typically addressed foreign affairs, leaving the domestic matters for his partner. His unstinting support of the President complicated the already difficult task of crafting a GOP public image along the lines of the more nuanced position espoused by Richard Nixon, among others, and in various GOP policy pronouncements. Had Republicans presented a united front for cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, bombing Hanoi and Haiphong, and placing greater reliance on training and deploying ARVN forces, Nixon arguably would have had more political and intellectual capital to draw on for Vietnamization. Instead Republicans from time to time posed hard questions, but failed convincingly to answer them. Their Senate Policy Committee Report ended with two such questions:

Before making any further decisions to support or differ with the President, Republicans might agree to seek hard, realistic answers to two basic questions:

1 What precisely is our national interest in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos?

2. To what further lengths are we prepared to go in support of this interest?[38]

Whether as a matter of conviction, or from a sense that Johnson's war was better than no war at all, Republicans and other hawks did not press as hard as they might have to answer these questions. Meanwhile, Congressional doves did. In doing so, they amassed the intellectual and political capital they would deploy during the Nixon years.

4.

Doves

"*I take it that what all men are really after is some form or perhaps only some formula of peace*."

Joseph Conrad

Time and again, supporters of the American war effort would point to Congressional appropriation of the requisite funds. Had Congress not intended to endorse the ground war and its conduct, they reasoned, it need only have cut the purse strings. This was not a fair test. Once the troops were in the field, legislators felt they had little choice but to vote the supplies and ammunition, and indeed the additional troops needed to protect them. No one, hawk or dove, would lay himself open to the charge of callousness to the needs of "our boys on the front line." The annual appropriations debates make this quite clear. Congressional floor debate and committee hearings, especially in Fulbright's prolific Foreign Relations Committee, disclose steady opposition. Much dove criticism was self-serving and not very useful. If Hanoi used one bombing pause to infiltrate additional manpower southward, why would the next be any different?

But some of the criticism was telling. Most doves were Democrats, although a number were found in the now largely extinct Ripon GOP faction. (Foreign Relations members Javits of New York and Case of New Jersey would later fall prey to conservative primary challenges.) If the bipartisan ideal inhibited Republicans, the constraints on Democrats were stronger still. Johnson was their party leader, the architect both of their 1964 gains and of the Great Society. To the extent that Democratic Congressional leaders might harbor dovish tendencies, loyalty to their chief muted them. (Indeed, it is often held that Johnson accepted the vice-presidential nomination precisely because he knew a Kennedy victory in 1960 would stint his independence as Senate Majority Leader.) But Congressional opposition to the war grew all the same. The need to support Johnson diverted dove energies away from direct confrontation and toward an intellectual critique of the conflict and more broadly of American foreign policy. When President Nixon introduced Vietnamization in November 1969, he faced a more coherent and mature, if flawed, critique than Johnson had. Nixon would have less margin for error.

There was a measure of opposition to Johnson's policies early on in the 89th Congress, but the rationale would change over time. Oregon's Wayne Morse had been one of only two Senators to oppose the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Morse was something of an old-school idealist, one who wanted a foreign policy that lived up to American ideals. He soon concluded that American military activity in Southeast Asia clashed with those ideals. When the President announced retaliation for the Communist raid on the American installation at Pleiku, Morse took to the Senate floor to argue that two wrongs do not make a right. Communist treaty violations were inexcusable, he said, but they did not justify similar U.S. conduct.[39] The problem with Morse's argument was that hawks could stand it on its head--a policy true to American values might also dictate an effort at nation building in South Vietnam.

At least three weaknesses marred the flurry of Congressional peace proposals that followed the President's retaliation announcement. Many plans called for some sort of bombing halt or carefully calibrated reduction, even after it had become clear that Hanoi would utilize these to create "new facts" on the ground. Another staple was "negotiations." Many a Senator or Representative saw talk as a panacea (a harbinger of much later foreign affairs thought), when the likely result would be American withdrawal with Hanoi's forces remaining in place. Finally, doves almost never mentioned the extent of or role played by Soviet and Chinese aid to Hanoi. This last omission would prove the most important over the long run. Elide discussion of Moscow's role and one concludes that if Saigon

was losing that was because it deserved to lose, whether for its "corruption," defined ever more fastidiously, or for its lack of genuinely nationalist credentials. When President Ford proved unable to extract emergency aid from the 94th Congress, this "proof" of Saigon's unworthiness would play a central role.

By April 1965, Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Fulbright was calling for a temporary halt to air strikes against the North in the hope that it would lead to negotiations.[(40)] Two months later, Frank Church of Idaho recommended direct dealings with the Viet Cong. This, Church hoped, would lead to the ever-elusive negotiations. Yet Church also wanted the Administration to weaken its bargaining position in advance, telling the Senate that "further escalation of the war northward should absolutely be resisted."[(41)] On January 21, 1966, some 77 Democratic Representatives--over a quarter of the party's House members--sent Johnson a letter urging a continued peace offensive, despite the lack of any encouraging response to earlier U.S. efforts.[(42)] Less than a week later, 15 of 67 Democratic Senators sent a similar letter.[(43)] These proposals all assumed that the Communists would be swayed by dint of carrots rather than sticks, a highly debatable proposition. Since even Johnson wanted peace talks, the Congressmen were effectively pressing the President to renounce U.S. leverage if it was necessary to procure "negotiations." That in turn suggests that even at this early date, Congressional doves had less interest in preserving the Saigon regime than they did in opposing the war.

Still the proposals came. Robert Kennedy suggested on February 19, 1966 that Washington offer the National Liberation Front a share of power only to claim three days later that his remarks had been misinterpreted.[(44)] In February, Connecticut's Abraham Ribicoff wanted an international peace conference at Vienna and, in May, a special General Assembly session. Fulbright on March 1 argued for the neutralization of all Southeast Asia.[(45)] Mike Mansfield offered any number of interlocutors for Johnson--in June it was Peking, in August, the ever-helpful Charles de Gaulle, and in between Mansfield thought that the various Asian leaders ought to resolve matters among themselves.[(46)] In 1967, Fulbright proposed an eight-point peace program, and Robert Kennedy a three stage plan.[(47)] But it was liberal Republican Representative F. Bradford Morse of Massachusetts who drew the finest distinctions when he called for a five-step suspension of U.S. bombing working its way southward from the 21st parallel.[(48)]

None of these plans even came close to attaining majority support. But they indicated that the lopsided rollcall approving war appropriations only masked growing Congressional discontent. With war expenditures outpacing appropriations, Johnson on January 19, 1966, requested a supplementary $13.1 billion for fiscal year 1966. Congress would grant the funds by votes of 932 in the Senate and 3934 in the House--on the surface a ringing endorsement. But as *Congressional Quarterly* reported, Senate consideration "was characterized by lengthy and acrimonious debate centering on President Johnson's Vietnam policies."[(49)] For two weeks, the upper house hashed out criticism of Administration policies, culminating in an unsuccessful Wayne Morse effort to repeal the Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Debate in the House was milder, but neither the gentler tone nor the overwhelming vote told the entire story. During that debate, some 78 Democratic Representatives signed a statement explaining the basis for their affirmative votes:

Mr. Chairman, we will vote for this supplemental defense authorization. The support of the American and allied troops who are fighting in South Vietnam requires it.

We reject any contention that approval of this legislation will constitute a mandate for unrestrained or indiscriminate enlargement of the military effort, and we strongly support continued efforts to initiate

negotiations for a settlement of the conflict.[(50)]

The 90th Congress also appropriated funds per Johnson's request, indeed a bit *more,* but edged further than its predecessor toward attaching strings. Senator Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania tried to add to the appropriation bill a statement opposing escalation of the conflict. Mansfield offered a weaker version and the full Senate agreed to the substitute by an 892 vote, with the appropriation and statement together carrying by 7219, or 17 fewer votes than the year before. As adopted, the declaration read:

The Congress hereby declares:

(1) its firm intentions to provide all necessary support for members of the armed forces of the United States fighting in Vietnam;

(2) its support of efforts being made by the President of the United States and other men of good will throughout the world to prevent an expansion of the war in Vietnam and to bring that conflict to an end through a negotiated settlement which will preserve the honor of the United States, protect the vital interests of this country, and allow the people of South Vietnam to determine the affairs of that nation in their own way; and

(3) its support for the convening of the nations that participated in the Geneva Conferences or any other meeting of nations similarly involved and interested as soon as possible for the purpose of pursuing the general principles of the Geneva accords of 1954 and 1962 and for formulating plans for bringing the conflict to an honorable conclusion.[(51)]

In conference, the House accepted Mansfield's language. It was the first Congressional statement of war policy since Tonkin Gulf, and a portent that the White House could not indefinitely count on legislative support, lopsided appropriation votes notwithstanding.

The Democratic Congress would only push the Democratic President so far. Exactly how far it would go never became clear, as Johnson's March 31, 1968 withdrawal from the Presidential race dampened matters pending that year's election. Doves in any event lacked the votes seriously to challenge Johnson. This may have been a long-term plus, for it forced the most thoughtful among them to develop a broad intellectual critique of the policies that got America into Vietnam in the first place. Here Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Fulbright took the lead. His committee was predominantly dovish, more so than its Armed Services competitor. Fulbright had voted for the Tonkin Resolution, indeed acknowledged at the time that it granted Johnson a blank check. By 1966, the Senator regretted his vote. "I can only say that I did not realize earlier how serious this commitment in Southeast Asia was. At the time of the 1964 resolution I really had no realization of what we were about to get into, or how it was about to escalate."[(52)]

When Johnson submitted the fiscal year 1966 supplementary funding request, Fulbright could not oppose the needs of American troops in the field. But he could stage a media event. From January 18-February 18, the Foreign Relations committee held extensive hearings, purportedly to weigh the appropriation request, but in reality to explore more thoroughly the rationale for the American commitment. The direction in which Fulbright's views were evolving had been clear at least since Johnson's intervention in the Dominican Republic the year before. The Senator on that occasion attacked a U.S. tendency "not to look beyond a Latin American politician's anti-communism."

Obviously, if we based all our policies on the mere possibility of communism, then we would have to set ourselves against just about every progressive political movement in the world, because almost all

such movements are subject to at least the theoretical danger of Communist takeover."[(53)]

Daniel Yergin later would conclude that "From that moment can be dated the breakup of the cold war consensus and the beginning of a meaningful dissent."[(54)]

The "Vietnam Hearings," large portions nationally televised, helped to enunciate to the American public a coherent alternative to Administration policy. Here, before the ultimate arbiters of U.S. policy, the doves seized the language of foreign affairs realism while Secretary of State Dean Rusk did little to stop them. In George Frost Kennan, Fulbright had the perfect witness. Anyone familiar with Kennan's career understood that the "father" of American containment never meant actively to check Soviet advances everywhere and certainly not in Southeast Asia. As a former Ambassador to Tito's Yugoslavia, he was well placed to make the case that the fall of a given nation to something called "Communism" need not necessarily harm American interests. Kennan did not disappoint. Vietnam lacked "major military, industrial importance," and our effort there sacrificed resources better deployed in more crucial areas. A Communist South Vietnam would not become a Chinese puppet in any event. Having engaged, the U.S. probably would not achieve its stated goals--even the "most formidable military successes" would not achieve "something called 'victory.'"[(55)] Kennan was as always charming and articulate, and to one reading the transcripts after the fact a more persuasive witness than the Secretary of State, although the role of critic is by its nature the easier one.

The most interesting aspect of the Secretary's testimony was his willingness to abdicate the realist mantle. Over and again the panel prompted Rusk for a cold-blooded assessment of the U.S. geopolitical interest. Stuart Symington of Missouri, for example, queried whether the Administration might not mute some criticism by tying the Vietnam situation to "the growing problem incident to the Chinese becoming a nuclear power."[(56)] Albert Gore of Tennessee continued in the same vein:

Mr. Secretary, I think you may observe from the number of questions this morning that there is some need to spell out in detail to the American people the validity of our position in South Vietnam. I am willing to accept, as I indicated earlier, that we are there, misguidedly or wisely. In this exchange of views, which I hope may result in some benefit, I would like to submit to you that Vietnam is not the big factor here. The big factor is the equation between the Big Three powers involved there.[(57)]

Chairman Fulbright made the point still more clearly:

I think there is some feeling that, perhaps we have intervened in a family quarrel here, and that we may not be justified on the grounds here presented, which leads me again to come back to this question which, in all frankness, is a more understandable and a simpler and, perhaps, more justifiable reason if you are willing to rely on that, that this is such a danger to the free world and to our own security, even the possibility or probability--possibility, I reverse those--either the probability or possibility of Chinese Communist imperialism, that is of their expanding physically, I presume in this area, I think that is traditional, at least it is understandable to me. If that is the ground, it is more understandable, whether justified or not, I do not know, but it is more understandable. Are you unwilling to put it on that ground?[(58)]

As it happened, Rusk *was* unwilling. He justified the U.S. engagement in altruistic terms. "To put it in its simplest terms, Mr. Chairman, we believe that the South Vietnamese are entitled to a chance to make their own decisions about their own affairs and their own future course of policy."[(59)] The Secretary then proceeded to declaim any "selfish" American motive: "We are not, for example, trying

to acquire a new ally. If South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese people wish to pursue a nonaligned course by their own option, that is an option which is open to them."[60]

There were long-term consequences to proceeding in this manner. Giving Fulbright and his handful of doves a justification they might find more appealing was not all that important in 1966. It was interesting--in that Johnson and Nixon both seemed to assume that their opponents would find an altruistic policy more palatable--but not important in 1966. The doves did not have the votes to block Administration policy. But if the war aimed to win the South Vietnamese people freedom to chart their own course, their failure to achieve "victory" given the support of the heretofore "invincible" Americans inevitably would suggest that the Southerners or their institutions were unworthy. This would bring Saigon's "corruption" into play, an issue that would have assumed far less significance had the U.S. justified its war effort on geopolitical grounds. Another long-term consequence was that altruism ultimately would sustain less sacrifice than would geopolitical threat. As American casualties grew, the absence of any commensurate tangible objective loomed larger.

The Fulbright hearings charted an additional and potent dove argument, and leading doves leapt to utilize it. On February 24, Clark of Pennsylvania pointed to Burma, and perhaps more questionably to Indonesia and the Philippines, as examples where the U.S. refrained from intervention against perceived Communist threats. "In none of these cases did our failure to intervene bring the so-called domino theory into effect."[61] Wayne Morse, who earlier had stressed the effect of intervention on American values, now asked: "Since when, and in what act of Congress, is Southeast Asia defined as vital to the security of the United States, justifying any unilateral action that may be needed on out part to defend it?"[62] Ernest Gruening of Alaska put it more bluntly: "Nothing that happens in Vietnam affects our national security."[63]

And yet the dove realists elided unpleasant truths. Soviet and Chinese aid to Hanoi was not a common topic of discussion. Nor was that of free elections in the North, although Saigon's shortcomings in this regard were always a fit subject for discussion.[64]

Still, the hearings proved so successful that Fulbright repeated the effort a year later. This time, the committee explored the "responsibilities of the United States as a great power." Fulbright's introductory statement laid out his goal of educating the American public to the "actual range of possibilities in the foreign policy field." There was, the chairman said, "virtually no agreed doctrinal or philosophical basis to sustain" the U.S. role as "leader of this so-called free world."[65] The goal was not immediately to extricate America from Vietnam, as the Committee and indeed Congress still proved unwilling directly to challenge Johnson. Blocked on that front, doves instead deemed Indochina a symptom and sought to treat the underlying disease by articulating a broad alternative to American foreign policy.

Fulbright selected witnesses who could add to his wide-ranging critique. George Kennan offered a reprise of his 1966 performance. He called for Americans to free themselves from the "abnormal sensitivities" of earlier decades, as citizens of stronger countries bore a "greater obligation to moderation to restraint, to an effort to understand the point of view of people."[66] Former Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer testified that the Administration had vastly overestimated the Chinese threat. Retired Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, another alumnus of the previous year's hearings (he advocated the "enclave strategy"), now called for a quick end to hostilities and closer American ties with Communist countries. *New York Times* Assistant Managing Editor Harrison E. Salisbury added that American bombing was counterproductive and enhanced North Vietnamese purpose and unity.[67]

Perhaps most interesting of all was history professor Henry Steele Commager. The professor agreed with the Chairman that the United States had placed a counterproductive emphasis on military action, a product of "cold war psychology, the continuation of what I regard as our obsession with communism." The disorder was part of a long and deeply embedded notion of moral superiority itself traceable to the Founding Fathers' sense of moral superiority.[(68)] An enlightening exchange with Joseph Clark of Pennsylvania followed:

Senator Clark. I take it, therefore, you believe pragmatically as well as ethically and morally that international cooperation is a wiser policy for the United States than international conflict? This is, perhaps, a cliché but you think it is worth repeating? You agree with that?

Mr. Commager. Oh, certainly, sir.

Senator Clark. And in that regard you would favor political rather than military solutions to international problems, and, indeed, would look with some apprehension on the effort to solve international problems through military means?

Mr. Commager. I very much doubt that problems can be ultimately solved by military means. They can be controlled temporarily. If we 'win' in Vietnam, we would not have solved any fundamental problems. Even the necessary use of force--and it was absolutely necessary from 1939 on--solved immediate problems, but others just as large loomed up on the horizon. Problems do not ever get completely solved. They get replaced by new problems, and the task of Senators and historians is to look far enough ahead to see the new problems that are going to rise up after you have dealt with the immediate ones.

Senator Clark. As a historian, would it be your comment that it is the effort to achieve military solutions, which are essentially political problems having created most of the animosities which make our task so difficult today in seeking world peace?

Mr. Commager. Yes, sir; I would agree with that.

Senator Clark. Now I take it also that you would support the general concept of attempting through international institutions to achieve a lasting peace through the development of enforceable international law, if you will, and general disarmament?

Mr. Commager. Oh, certainly.[(69)]

Later that afternoon, Professor Commager discussed how American foreign policy had caused a "sense of disillusionment and alienation, in the 'intellectual community.'" He found this singularly disturbing. "I can think of few things more sobering," he testified, "not because we need their support but because we deserve and ought, for our own case, to deserve that support; that is, we should so conduct ourselves as to have it and to be able to take it for granted."[(70)]

Here in February of 1967 we have much of the critique that would inform succeeding Democratic administrations. The elements present at this early date included a growing belief in the efficacy of moral suasion and in "world opinion"; a fine sensitivity for American hypocrisy; faith in international institutions (although Commager at least reserved some suspicion for the United Nations); and a belief that "intellectuals"--soon to supplant the "ins-and-outers" in the foreign affairs establishment--had special insight into a "complex" world.[(71)]

Hawks, a decided committee minority, fought back as best they could. Ohio Senator Frank J. Lausche accused Fulbright of conducting a "slanted, one-sided" hearing, but of course "educating" the public was Fulbright's purpose in the first place.[(72)] Karl E. Mundt of South Dakota forced Kennan to acknowledge the role of Soviet supplies in Hanoi's military effort, but the diplomat tartly responded: "I think Soviet arms would not be being used against our people there, of course, if we were not there."[(73)] When his fellow New Jerseyite Harrison Williams pointed out that a bombing halt would allow greater infiltration of Russian weaponry and cause greater American casualties, Kennan replied that the U.S. would reap "great gains in the attitude of world opinion."[(74)]

Fulbright continued to develop his thesis during 1968. This time the hearings covered the nature of revolution and the significance of revolutions for American foreign policy. A trio of Harvard Professors appeared. Crane Briton told the committee that foreign interference in revolutions had been unsuccessful "without exception." Brandishing the new buzzword, he advised that the situation in Vietnam was "complex." James C. Thomson added that Americans irrationally feared a "China-on-the-march." Louis Hartz, author of *The Liberal Tradition in America*, explained that Americans did not understand foreign social revolutions because they had never experienced one, since American national culture was a product of 17th-century Puritan migration.[(75)]

If doves controlled the Foreign Relations committee, hawks held sway at Armed Services. Indeed, at the beginning of 1967, every member advocated *escalating* the war. Chairman John Stennis of Mississippi did not ask Amherst professors whether the use of force might be counterproductive and offensive to intellectuals. He did appoint a Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, which in August 1967 heard testimony from Defense Secretary McNamara and from ten generals and admirals. The Subcommittee found a "sharp difference" of opinion between the Secretary and the brass as to how best to wage war, and it issued a report siding with the latter against McNamara's "gradualism." [(76)]

Together the views emerging from Foreign Relations and Armed Services hearings crowded Johnsonian gradualism from the field. McNamara's resignation, and the President's subsequent withdrawal from the 1968 Presidential race merely ratified the result of an increasingly Darwinian competition. When Richard M. Nixon assumed the Presidency on January 20, 1969, only two competing visions remained. The new President's first year in office would indicate that his margin for error was small, smaller perhaps than he would have thought.

5.

Auguries

"I have chosen a plan for peace. I believe it will succeed. [I]f it does succeed, what the critics say now won't matter. If it does not succeed, anything I say then won't matter."

Richard Nixon, November 3, 1969

As President, Richard Nixon would implement policies remarkably similar to those he and his party's official organs had advocated for the preceeding five years. They proved remarkably successful, at least by comparison with those of Lyndon Johnson. The Republican administration extricated the United States from the land war while unleashing to a point American air power. It inflicted a sharp defeat on Communist forces in 1972 and moved to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail. Nixon had won the election with a narrow plurality, but the doves had proven unable even to nominate one of their own.

Even if one counts Johnson's vice president as a "peace candidate," the hawkish contestants carried a solid popular majority. And yet the Democratic Congress dogged Nixon from the beginning. In June 1969--barely far enough into Nixon's tenure for a decent honeymoon--the Senate passed a "national commitments" resolution affirming the Congressional role in authorizing the dispatch of American forces abroad. Legislative proposals to end the war grew in both number and support. When the crunch at last came in 1975, opposition to *in extremis* military aid proved implacable. Why, then, did Nixon fail?

Part of the problem arose from the fact that Nixon was Nixon. It is hard to exaggerate the level of venom he inspired on the American Left. The reasons for this are complex, but suffice it to say that the hostility dated back at least to his 1946 tangle with Helen Gahagan Douglas--a race in which, one might recall, Douglas compared Nixon's voting record to that of pro-Communist Congressman Vito Marcantonio before Nixon responded in kind. Nixon had implacable enemies. By 1968 there was perhaps not much he could do to assuage them. But he could have done more to promote his friends. Although the 1968 returns had produced only small Republican Congressional gains (albeit to the highest levels since 1956), Nixon did not move to strengthen the GOP in subsequent races.[(77)]

Another difficulty was that aspects of Vietnamization strengthened the doves' hand. As American troops came home, anti-war congressmen shed their inhibitions about voting down war appropriations. Nixon's great power détente further weakened his leverage. If the U.S. could deal with Moscow and Peking, why not Hanoi? Finally -- and possibly this proved to be of the greatest significance -- Nixon failed to reclaim the realist mantle from Fulbright and his academic allies. The new administration would break with its predecessor's military strategy, but not with its justifications of American engagement. As Nixon clung to a moral justification for supporting Saigon, doves could argue with increasing credibility that if South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu and his minions were "corrupt," they did not "deserve" American support.

Nixon offered his peace proposals and outlined the Vietnamization policy in a nationally televised address of November 3, 1969. Two weeks later, on November 18 and 19, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee examined Secretary of State William Rogers and Defense Secretary Melvyn Laird. The witnesses, Rogers in particular, proved either evasive or unable to answer the most obvious questions: when would all American forces be withdrawn, and what would we do if Saigon proved unable to stand on its own?

In fairness to the Secretary of State, the committee would not even let him finish his opening statement. ("I have been pretty fast. I could read this in ten minutes," Rogers pleaded to no avail.) Fulbright jumped in to assert that the U.S. had never sought Vietnamese self-determination, beginning with the decision to aid France. Rogers replied, "Senator, I would have to go back and look. I suppose that at the time the aid was given it was thought that this is what the people wanted." At this point Gale McGee of Wyoming, who would assume the function of making the realist case the Administration would not, began to assert that the objective was to draw France into NATO, but Fulbright cut him off as well.[(78)]

The Senators pressed for information as to the President's withdrawal timetable. Clifford Case, a liberal New Jersey Republican, bluntly warned that "we have to accept that American opinion will not tolerate an indefinite support of a losing regime in South Vietnam." "We have to have a definite schedule," Case later warned.[(79)] The Secretary argued, and plausibly enough, that the Nixon plan contained certain flexibilities, and that this was necessary in a war situation. But the Senators pressed on, displaying a lawyerlike determination to close every means of rhetorical escape: Case--"What does flexibility mean?" Rogers--"He is the President. Could you not wait and let him try, wait to see

how it works out?"[(80)] The Senators could not. Albert Gore minutely analyzed Nixon's address. The President had said the United States would withdraw "as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom" and that seemed to make withdrawal contingent upon Saigon's progress. Rogers tried to close the loophole totally, but he could not or would not:

The way I read that is that he has a plan, and he says we will withdraw all our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program and as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom. He means our program has taken that into account, that we have analyzed what we think the South Vietnamese are going to need to become strong enough to do that. That is a factor in our program and our program is going to be carried out.[(81)]

The timetable issue assumed greater importance because doves argued that Vietnamization would not work. Ultimately Saigon would collapse, either because it was not a genuine expression of Vietnamese nationalism or because it was fundamentally corrupt or for some combination of the two. For Case, "the question" was this: "Are the South Vietnamese shaping up? How long will it take them to do so?"[(82)] It was a matter of some importance, for if the Saigon regime lacked a popular base, it was, in the committee's worldview, less likely to survive. The committee's conclusion depended in part on ignoring the scope of Soviet and Chinese aid to Hanoi and in part on an outlook that even during wartime conditioned a regime's durability on its "legitimacy" rather than on calculations of military strength.

Regardless, the irreducible issue was whether, in the event the south did crumble, Vietnamization required American intervention to save its ally. The Senators repeatedly pressed this issue, and Administration witnesses just as repeatedly dodged it. If Saigon were "getting licked," Javits asked, "is that going to change our withdrawal schedule, are we then going to put troops back in or bomb again or stop our plan?" Rogers then replied "Well, I do not want to express a view on that because I do not think it is going to happen." Gore immediately pressed the point, and Rogers then allowed "we have no *present* plans."[(83)] Unsatisfied, Javits continued. Did the Administration reserve "the right to modulate or stop wherever our plan is at a given time when we see such an increased jeopardy?" The Secretary's response was contradictory on its face: "I *think* the President made it clear that the plan, depending on what happens, *might* be altered to take care of that contingency. But he also makes it clear that his plan *contemplates* removal of all forces from South Vietnam." Javits concluded with the following exchange:

Senator Javits. One of the risks we are reasonably willing to run in this plan is the fact that we may pull out and South Vietnam may lose the ball game. This is a terrible risk.

Secretary Rogers.I do not like to answer that because we do not think it involves that risk.[(84)]

As Frank Church put it, "I am really more concerned that when it comes to a testing under fire, the South Vietnamese forces will not perform better in the future than they have in the past, and if that would happen, what then do we do?"[(85)] Albert Gore drew the appropriate conclusion: "The time will come when you cannot withdraw further, when you may have to send troops back in, or when the Saigon Government will fall because it is so narrowly based."[(86)]

Defense Secretary Laird also fudged the question. When John Sherman Cooper of Kentucky raised the possibility of a Dunkirk-like debacle, Laird replied that "it is most important that this Vietnamization plan work." If it did not, he implied, the Nixon Doctrine of relying upon regional forces to maintain stability would be gravely jeopardized.[(87)]

The hearings demonstrated that even if the American people would afford their new President an opportunity to try his policies, the intellectual clash would continue. As Frank Church observed, "The Americans will support the President. It is not a question of a couple of months or 60 days. I think it was so sad when the suggestion was made to give him 60 days of quiet and no criticism. You cannot do it that way. Whether our policy is right or it is not ."[(88)] In effect, the committee conceded Nixon his way for the time being--it would be hard not to do so, given the popular public response to the Vietnamization Address--but senators set about drawing the yardsticks by which Nixon's program would be judged. If Saigon failed to perform on the battlefield, it would not deserve further support.

The Nixon Administration allowed the doves to define success and failure. In that sense, the inability of Gerald Ford to procure aid for Thieu during Hanoi's 1975 offensive is traceable in no small part to his predecessor's flawed political tactics six years earlier. While Nixon's conduct of the war very arguably was sounder militarily than was Johnson's, his domestic opponent was not LBJ but the doves in Congress, and Nixon let the doves determine the terms of their climactic battle.

By arguing for American aid to support the right of the South Vietnamese people to "self-determination," and later on grounds of honoring commitments so made, Nixon fought the war of ideas on the doves' strong turf and allowed Fulbright to appropriate the realist language that properly should have been his. The Administration could have utilized the prestige of the Presidency to buttress any number of arguments. A victory for Hanoi could result in a valuable warm water port for the growing Soviet navy. An American defeat might complicate efforts to reach a détente with the Soviet Union. One need not defend the domino theory at its most extreme to point out that aggressive nations have a way of threatening their neighbors. Moscow and Peking made possible the scope of Hanoi's war effort, but it was Senators like Gale McGee who reminded the committee that Hanoi never held free elections, that a Northern military victory by dint of Russian arms did not offer the South Vietnamese "self-determination." Administration witnesses never tried to make this case.

The administration instead employed moral justifications which doves could easily counter. If Americans had been doing so much of the fighting and had propped up one South Vietnamese leader after another, how could the war effort be for South Vietnamese self-determination? Fulbright could produce any number of academics to discourse on the nature of revolution and why America was a counter-revolutionary force on the wrong side of history. Journalists would document Saigon's imperfections in the most loving detail. By making his stand here, Nixon invited a continuous erosion of public support for Saigon which by 1975 would be nearly universal. What is more, he gave the doves the chance to draw what appeared to be a reasonable line in the sand. Nixon would have his chance to implement Vietnamization, an opportunity symbolized by a House resolution of December 1969 which by a 33455 roll call vote endorsed his efforts to achieve "peace with justice" in Vietnam. The President would not, however, have a blank check. Eighty House Democrats--nearly a third--appended a statement of reservation. "We do not endorse everything said by the President in his statement of November 3. We specifically do not give advance approval of future decisions on Vietnam. We affirmatively urge efforts to reduce the level of violence in Vietnam, the broadening of the base of the Saigon government"[(89)] It was growing clear by the end of the new Administration's first year that its mandate extended to a gradual withdrawal and to arming the South Vietnamese for one shot at defending themselves. Any perceived expansion of American involvement (as in Cambodia a year later) or failure on Saigon's part, judged either on the battlefield or by civics text standards, would spark a severe political contest, one that Nixon, when the time came, was in no position to win.

Notes

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13. Johnson quoted in Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud that Defined a Decade* (New York: Norton, 1997), 261. Shesol considers Johnson's charge self-serving hindsight.

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80. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 43.

81. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 4647.

82. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 24.

83. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 38 (emphasis added).

84. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 39 (emphasis added).

85. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 110.

86. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 47.

87. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 105.

88. United States Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations, *Briefing on Vietnam,* 26.

89. *1969 Congressional Quarterly Almanac,* 857.