Britain, Anglo-American Relations and the Ending of the US War in Vietnam, 1969-1973

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the approach of the Labour government of Harold Wilson in 1969-1970 and the Conservative government of Edward Heath from 1970 towards the war in Vietnam in general and towards the Paris peace process in particular. In the historiography of the Vietnam war, there has been little attention given to UK policy in connection with the US Nixon administration's efforts to secure a "peace with honor" for America, and this dissertation seeks to fill a gap in the literature. As will be seen, both the Labour and Conservative governments were more actively involved at a diplomatic level than the historiography suggests. In the first place, in terms of the UK-US "special relationship", Britain was called upon by America for support both in the ongoing war and the parallel peace process. In the Wilson-Heath period, the UK accepted the imperative of containing communism in Southeast Asia, where the UK retained considerable Commonwealth, economic and strategic interests. This dictated support for the US. At the same time, the US war was very unpopular in Britain, and support for the US had to be balanced against political considerations closer to home. It is one of the more surprising findings of this dissertation that Heath, who is often depicted as the most sceptical UK postwar Prime Minister about the Anglo-American relationship, was consistently supportive of the Nixon administration's policy – even controversial features of that policy such as the 1972 Christmas bombing. However, as will be seen, Heath's attitude was related to his European policy; by backing the US on Vietnam, he hoped to be able to maintain good UK-US relations after the UK joined the EEC. Heath did not regard UK entry into the EEC as building a new special relationship with Europe to take the place of the old UK-US one, but as an additional prop of support for the UK. Finally, in the Wilson-Heath period, we see the legacy of an earlier UK Vietnam peace initiative – the 1954 Geneva settlement which ended the French war in Vietnam. The terms of that settlement had been quickly violated, and Britain, along with the USSR, the co-chairs of the 1954 Geneva conference, assumed responsibility for restoring the situation in Vietnam along the lines of the 1954 settlement. This sometimes required the UK to distance itself in public from aspects of US policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and to propose peace initiatives of its own, to the irritation of the Americans. Heath, however, in contrast to Wilson, refused to be overly loyal to 1954 and tended to back the US, as noted, in most instances. But when peace finally arrived, for the US at least, in 1973, the Heath government was determined not to assume any responsibility for its preservation in the way that the UK became entangled in the legacy of 1954.

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Kieran Pryce, December 2018.

INTRODUCTION

Britain, Anglo-American Relations and the Ending of the US War in Vietnam, 1969-1973

The historiography of the Vietnam war, or the English-language historiography at any rate, is dominated by US historians who want explanations for American involvement and reasons for American defeat.[1] Work on the British angle on the war is limited in comparison. At one level this is understandable as the UK was not directly involved in the fighting. At another level, Britain did play an important role at various times in the Vietnam story as a diplomatic actor, potential peacemaker, and supporter (and sometimes opposer) of American policy.

There is currently only one major overview work on Britain and the Vietnam war, Sylvia Ellis's *Britain, America and the Vietnam War*, but even this is not comprehensive as it does not go much beyond the Johnson period (1963-1969).[2] On an episodic basis arguably the greatest focus is given to the UK contribution to ending the first – French – war in Vietnam in 1954, and to the role of the then British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, in helping avert a major international crisis, and potentially a world war.[3] Other episodes in the Vietnam drama that have engaged scholars include the UK part in helping the French to restore their colonial

[1] See Kevin Ruane, 'Putting America in its Place? Recent Writing on the Vietnam Wars', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2002), pp.115-128.

[2] Sylvia Ellis, *Britain, America and the Vietnam War* (Westport: Praeger, 2004).

[3] The most recent treatment is Kevin Ruane and Matthew Jones, *Anthony Eden, Anglo-American Relations and the 1954 Indochina Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). I am grateful to Kevin Ruane for allowing me to read an advance copy of this book. In addition, see James Cable, *The Geneva Conference of 1954 on Indochina* (London: Macmillan, 1986), and various chapters and articles by Geoffrey Warner: 'The Settlement of the Indochina War', in John W. Young, ed., *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration 1951-55* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988); 'Britain and the Crisis over Dien Bien Phu, April 1954: the Failure of United Action', and 'From Geneva to Manila: British Policy towards Indochina and SEATO, May-September 1954', in Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud and Mark R. Rubin, eds, *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1990).

position at the end of the Second World War,[4] the UK role after 1954 as informal guarantor of the settlement that ended the French war,[5] British policy in the Kennedy years as US escalation began slowly,[6] the Wilson government's efforts to maintain good Anglo-American relations in the LBJ period while simultaneously steering clear of UK combat involvement on the US side,[7] and the Wilson government's various attempts to broker a peace settlement in the mid-to-late-1960s.[8]

To date, the period from January 1969, when formal Vietnam peace negotiations began in Paris, through to the end of the US war in January 1973, has been comparatively neglected both from the standpoint of British policy and the perspective of Anglo-American relations. On the US side, this M. Res. thesis covers the first Richard Nixon administration (1969-1973), and on the UK side it covers the back end of Harold Wilson's second Labour government (1969-1970) and the bulk of Edward Heath's first and only Conservative government (1970-1974). This is not to say that the Wilson-Heath period has been neglected by scholars, only that the issue of Vietnam is rarely if ever given sustained focus.[9] In this M. Res. thesis, however, it takes centre-stage. At the same time, this thesis locates UK Vietnam policy within the context

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[4] Peter Neville, *Britain in Vietnam, 1945-1946: Prelude to Disaster* (London: Routledge, 2007); T. O. Smith, *Britain and the Origins of the Vietnam War: UK Policy in Indo-China 1943-50* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[5] Arthur Combs, 'The Path Not Taken: The British Alternative to U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1954–1956', *Diplomatic History,* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1995), pp.33-57.

[6] Peter Busch, *All the Way with JFK: Britain, the US and the Vietnam War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[7] Nicholas Tarling, *The British and the Vietnam War: Their Way with LBJ* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2017); Sylvia Ellis, 'Lyndon Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War: a *Not* so Special Relationship?', in Jonathan Hollowell, ed., *Twentieth Century Anglo-American Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

[8] John Dumbrell and Sylvia Ellis, 'British Involvement in Vietnam Peace Initiatives 1966-1967: Marigolds, Sunflowers and "Kosygin Week"', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2003), pp.113-149.

[9] For example, Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon, eds, *The Heath Government, 1970-74: A Reappraisal* (London: Routledge, 1996); John W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964-1970, Volume 2: International Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Alex Spelling, 'Edward Heath and Anglo–American Relations 1970–1974: A Reappraisal', *Diplomacy and Statecraft,* Vol. 20, No. 4 (2009), pp.638-658; Andrew Scott, *Allies Apart: Heath, Nixon and the Anglo-American Relationship* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011); Geraint Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War: the Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964-1970* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2015 edition).

of Anglo-American relations. British policy was nearly always framed in terms of how it would impact on UK-US relations, and to focus purely on Vietnam would be to research this period of history in a vacuum that did not exist at the time.

To dwell on the so-called Anglo-American "special relationship" for a moment, historian Nigel Ashton has pointed out that 'the term "special relationship" can hardly appear in public unless wrapped in commas and accompanied by a question mark'.[10] In this thesis, it is also wrapped in speech marks and questioned because the dilemma for every UK government after 1945 was to find a way of 'managing the Americans' in what was an ambiguous, not straightforwardly special relationship.[11] British power, military and economic, was on the decline after the Second World War, while America's was on the rise. UK policymakers sought to maintain the closest possible relationship with the United States, as this was in Britain's security interest in the Cold War, and it was also vital in terms of UK economic viability given the centrality of the US to the global economy. The problem for the British came when US policy appeared dangerous or wrong. The question then became how far UK opposition to America should go. If the British were too critical, this risked the Americans taking offence and damaging relations. If the British always went along meekly with US policy, regardless of whether they felt it was right or wrong, that suggested that the UK had become subservient to America, a difficult status for a proud nation to handle.[12]

Vietnam offers a case study of this bigger issue. In 1954, for example, the British Conservative government strongly opposed US plans to intervene militarily to save the French position in Vietnam; the British feared that US intervention would trigger Chinese counter-

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[10] Nigel Ashton, *Kennedy, Macmillan and the Cold War: the Irony of Interdependence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2002), p.6.

[11] See Kevin Ruane and James Ellison, 'Managing the Americans', in Gaynor Johnson, ed., *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2005).

[12] See the discussion of 'power by proxy' in David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the 20th Century* (London: Longman, 1991), pp.177-178.

intervention, and possibly a world war. In the end, British opposition proved decisive, and there was no US military action. Instead, at the Geneva conference on Indochina, the war was brought to a peaceful – but as it turned out, temporary – end. The consequence for the "special relationship" however was very damaging and some historians have argued that the Eisenhower administration's anger towards Eden and his Indochina crisis management in 1954 contributed to the harsh way the US dealt with the UK (and Eden) during the Suez crisis two years later in 1956.[13] A decade later, in the mid-1960s, the British Labour government was faced with an appeal from the US Johnson administration for UK support on the ground in Vietnam – Johnson wanted 'more flags' alongside the stars-and-stripes, and indeed Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Thailand would commit troops to assist American in the war.[14] The Wilson government, however, refused to dispatch UK forces, but did offer moral support even though sections of the Labour party in parliament was vehemently opposed to US policy in Vietnam. Wilson could not fully disassociate the UK from the US due to Britain's economic dependence on American economic support at a time of serious UK balance of payments problems. Similarly, the Wilson Labour government's promotion of various peaceful solutions to the war caused resentment Washington and differences over Vietnam threatened at times to poison US-UK relations on a wider plane.[15]

In this thesis, there will consideration as to how the Wilson Labour government dealt with the Vietnam problem in 1969-1970, when US policy was directed by the new Nixon administration, but the greater part of the thesis will focus on the Heath Conservative

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[13] D. R. Thorpe, *Eden: the Life and Times of Anthony Eden, First Earl of Avon, 1897-1977* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), p.405; David Dutton, 'Anthony Eden', in T. G. Otte., ed., *The Makers of British Foreign Policy: from Pitt to Thatcher* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p.232.

[14] Fredrik Logevall, 'Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol.32, No.1 (2004), pp.103-105

[15] Jonathan Colman, *A "Special Relationship"?: Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson and Anglo-American Relations "at the summit", 1964-168* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp.75-99; Geraint Hughes, 'A "Missed Opportunity" for Peace? Harold Wilson, British Diplomacy and the *Sunflower* Initiative to End the Vietnam War, February 1967', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2003), pp.106-130.

government. Two interesting points will emerge in this connection. The first concerns the legacy of 1954. The Geneva settlement of the French war provided for temporary partition of Vietnam into a communist north and a non-communist south and for nationwide reunification elections in 1956. These elections did not happen as the US Eisenhower administration embarked on a nation-building project to turn South Vietnam into a separate anti-communist state. In 1960, with the formation of the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam, backed by communist North Vietnam, the US-backed government in Saigon came under severe threat. As the conflict began to escalate, the British, along with the Soviet Union, both of whom had co-chaired the 1954 conference, assumed responsibility for overseeing a return to the original peace settlement. This responsibility was informal but internationally recognised. Britain, more than the USSR, was seen as the architect of the 1954 peace and felt an obligation in that regard.[16]

In the Wilson years, the UK's role as Geneva co-chair, and the responsibility that went with it, was used by the London government as a convenient additional reason for resisting the Johnson administration's pressure to become actively involved in the war on America's side. To adopt a combatant role was inconsistent with the legacy of 1954, UK policymakers argued. As this thesis will show, in 1969-1970, the Wilson government continued to justify its commitment to peace in Vietnam by referencing Geneva, but unlike the Johnson period, the government had in place in Washington a US administration committed – at least publicly – to a peace agenda. The really interesting contrast is with the Heath government. At various points from its formation in June 1970 onwards, the Conservative government cast its approach to Vietnam within the framework of Geneva and presented itself as the heir of the 1954 settlement

[16] Cable, *Geneva,* p.137; James Cable, 'Improvising International Supervision in Indochina', paper passed to my supervisor by James Cable, 23 September 1989, and gratefully consulted. Also on the UK role see Command Papers Cmnd 2834, *Documents Relating to British Involvement in the Indo-China Conflict, 1945-1965* (London: HMSO, 1965), paragraphs 44-73.

and consistently proclaimed its commitment to a negotiated solution. But at several key moments – the Laotian crisis in 1971, and the US Christmas bombing of North Vietnam in 1972, for instance – the Heath government showed itself to be strongly supportive of the Nixon administration and largely unbound in expressing that support by any legacy of 1954.

The reason that UK support for the US in the early 1970s is noteworthy is that Edward Heath's attitude towards the United States is usually regarded by historians as 'far more idiosyncratic and ambivalent than that of any other post-1945 British leader' – indeed Heath was 'unique in the depths of his…coolness about the "special relationship"'.[17] Heath was more concerned to develop a parallel "special relationship" with the European Economic Community (EEC), which he fully intended the UK to join, than with always cultivating the old "special relationship" with America.[18] Heath had always disliked the term "special relationship" which he felt would alienate France and other Western European countries whose backing the UK needed for EEC entry. 'The expression is offensive to West Europeans & to many Commonwealth countries,' he wrote privately in 1963. 'It is even harmful to us in this country…I shall never use it! I completely repudiate the idea.'[19] A few years later, he brought this view into Number 10 Downing Street and although he usually phrased himself a bit more diplomatically his outlook did not escape the attention of the Americans. 'Of all British leaders,' recalled Henry Kissinger, 'Heath was the most indifferent to the American connection and perhaps even to Americans individually'.[20]

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[17] John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.88; Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, p.241.

[18] John Dickie, *Special No More: Anglo-American Relations – Rhetoric and Reality* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), pp.144-145; Alan P. Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.139.

[19] Heath to Caccia, 12 May 1963, UK National Archives, Kew, London, FO371/169120/3. I am grateful to my supervisor Professor Kevin Ruane for passing this reference on to me.

[20] Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little Brown, 1982), p.141.

However, as will be seen, while accepting the general consensus in the historiography regarding Heath and his approach to UK-US relations, this thesis will demonstrate that Vietnam was as an exception to the coolness rule, with Heath ready to go to considerable lengths to back America right and indeed wrong.

CHAPTER ONE

Vietnam, the Nixon administration, and UK-US relations, 1969-1970

On 5 November 1968, Republican Richard Nixon narrowly won the US Presidential election. According to historian Jeffrey Kimball, Vietnam was integral to Nixon's victory as his position on war, including a commitment to securing a peace with honour, won crucial votes.[21] In his memoirs, William Safire of the Nixon campaign team discussed what might have happened if the incumbent Democratic administration had made better progress in the Vietnam peace negotiations which had begun in Paris in May on a US-North Vietnam basis but failed to blossom into full-scale four-party (US, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, National Liberation Front (NLF)) talks by the time of the election. 'Nixon probably would not be President were it not for Thieu', Safire concluded in a reference to South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu who, just a few days before polling, reneged on a previous commitment to take part in a four-party peace process.[22]

Before Thieu's about-turn, Nixon's rival, Democratic Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, had caught up in the opinion polls as voters seemed happy to reward the Democrats for getting peace negotiations to the brink of starting. Later on it was shown that Nixon secretly sabotaged the peace process by getting a message to Thieu telling him he would get a better deal with Nixon rather than Humphrey in the White House. Thieu agreed, the embryonic peace process stalled, and President Johnson and Humphrey were left looking like they were playing party politics with the negotiations.[23]

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[21] Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), p.60.

[22] William Safire, *Before the Fall: An Inside View of the Pre-Watergate White House* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p.88.

[23] Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990* (London: Harper, 1990), p.233; John Farrell, 'Nixon's Vietnam Treachery', *New York Times*, 31 December 2016.

It is hard to say how many votes Nixon's sabotage actually delivered. In his campaign, Nixon maintained a careful balance on Vietnam to win support across the political spectrum. 'For doves and moderates,' Kimball notes, 'he spoke less of escalating military measures and protecting vital interests and more of taking non-military steps towards peace; for hawks and conservatives, he continued to talk about putting on pressure and winning the peace. For all Americans, he spoke of a peace with honor'.[24] But what did peace with honour mean? An end to the fighting for the United States without making significant concessions that would represent disguised defeat? The maintaining of a non-communist government in Saigon after US forces withdrew? Regardless of the wordplay, Nixon was committed to ending the war in Vietnam on his terms. He had no intention of becoming 'the first president of the United States to lose a war'.[25]

Across the Atlantic, the UK Labour government of Harold Wilson was a close observer of the US election. Britain was not only America's closest ally but a Southeast Asian power due to colonial/Commonwealth connections with Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo and Sarawak.[26] In addition, Wilson believed the UK had a 'special part to play' arising from its ongoing role as co-chair of the 1954 Geneva conference in the search for peace in Vietnam.[27] In the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), officials studied Nixon's campaign speeches for clues about his policies. The effort was frustrating due to the vague nature of Nixon's statements. As the Head of the FCO Southeast Asia Department observed, 'quotations' from his speeches 'could be used to back most options'. The British concluded that the ambiguity was 'no

[24] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.41.

[25] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (London: Century, 1983), p.597.

[26] John Young, *Britain and the World in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arnold, 1997), p.9

[27] Wilson-Gorton Meeting, 7 January 1969, PREM13/3030

doubt…intentional' leaving the UK government no wiser than many others about what a Nixon administration would bring for Vietnam.[28]

On the eve of Nixon's January 1969 inauguration the FCO reviewed the state of Anglo-American relations. It was normal practice to do a stocktake when a new President came into office. In addition, the process provides pointers to future UK policy. The paper was prepared by the UK Embassy in Washington in liaison with the Planning Staff of the FCO and attempted to assess Anglo-American relations from an objective viewpoint free of the 'sentimental overtones' relating to the "special relationship". The memorandum predicted that the growing 'uniqueness' of the United States would leave the US without peer in international affairs. With its economy forecast to grow by a greater amount each year than any other country, the gap between America and Britain in key areas such as volume of production, standards of living, technology and military power would inevitably increase. Only China and the Soviet Union could come close to the US in economic growth potential but these countries would probably experience difficulties trying to keep up. In view of the advance of American hegemony, Western Europe was likely to become ever more reliant on the United States militarily and economically. America itself, whose foreign policy was expected to focus increasingly on the triangular US-PRC-USSR relationship, would have little need for what the 'lesser powers' could offer beyond supporting US hegemony. FCO officials suspected that Britain would feel the brunt of this shift in power with UK influence on US policy declining and the "special relationship" becoming less special.[29]

While accepting the UK's status as a 'lesser power', the study argued that Britain still remained useful to the United States as it pursued its international agenda. One helpful factor was a common language, an obvious link but the value of Britain as an ally with whom the

[28] Johnston to Murray, 12 November 1969, and Wilford to Murray, 17 December 1968, FCO15/1040.

[29] FCO Planning Staff memorandum, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

Americans could 'most easily conduct a meaningful dialogue' was not to be under-rated. The same went for shared cultural ancestry, an asset to a 'comparatively rootless people' as the Americans were described. However, Britain's greatest advantage was the political influence it continued to wield in world affairs. Even if UK power was declining, the fact was that in the United States, Britain carried weight as an ally surpassing the UK's real size or influence and eclipsed that of any other US partner. But these assets were waning and the study predicted that as Britain became less indispensable to American aims, it might have to 'pay more for the right to influence the conduct of the United States' and accept 'increasing servitudes'. Indeed, the UK might shift from partner to 'instrument of American purpose'.[30]

This dilemma raised in the planning paper was not new. Every UK government since 1945 had to wrestle with the implications of the shift in the global balance.[31] Like their predecessors, the January 1969 FCO study looked to the future. Three main objectives were identified: maintaining good relations with the United States; UK economic recovery, which would increase its value as a US ally; and entry into the European Economic Community (EEC), which would give Britain an additional power-base. These goals were 'interdependent' but also potentially 'inconsistent'. With regard to close Anglo-American relations, these were as 'important as ever' to the UK but less so to the US. This meant that the British needed to be 'even more careful' about the manner and tone of exchanges with the US. If London disagreed with Washington on a matter of importance care was needed in conveying that disagreement especially in public. On the other hand, if US policy appeared dangerous or wrong it might be necessary to threaten to withhold UK support. This risked damaging relations but might also have a moderating influence on the American administration.[32]

[30] Ibid.

[31] See Ruane and Ellison, 'Managing the Americans'.

[32] FCO Planning Staff memorandum, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

As for British policy on Vietnam, this remained what it had been for nearly four years. The UK supported the right of South Vietnam, aided by the United States, to defend herself against communist aggression. Equally, any constructive proposal designed to bring a peaceful end to the conflict was to be welcomed, indeed the British were ready to use what influence they had as ongoing 1954 Geneva co-chair (in tandem with the USSR) to advance the cause of negotiations.[33] In this connection, the UK welcomed the start of a Paris-based peace process in January 1969 when Thieu abruptly dropped his opposition to negotiations and agreed that South Vietnam would participate alongside the US, DRV and NLF. However, there was to be no lessening of the fighting in South Vietnam as both sides tried to gain battlefield success to turn into diplomatic advantage.[34]

The peace progress itself soon grew sterile but this did not stop the USSR criticising the UK's position. According to the Soviet Union, Britain was acting contradictorily by claiming to champion peace while still supporting America's war. In the view of Moscow the British placed higher importance on maintaining good Anglo-American relations than making peace.[35] This criticism was not taken too seriously in London given that the USSR was providing North Vietnam with military aid. The FCO dismissed Soviet views as a 'routine piece of anti-British propaganda', while dismissed Moscow's 'topsy-turvy' viewpoint as 'unworthy of consideration'.[36]

But was there something to be said for the Kremlin's claim? Was there a contradiction in the UK position? Could the UK support the US in a war on the one hand and still be a peacemaker on the other hand? J. M. Addis, the British Ambassador to the Philippines, believed

[33] Factel 553, n.d., April 1968, FCO15/1067; Stewart memorandum, 15 January 1969, CAB129/140.

[34] Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp.16-17; Young, *International Policy*, p.80.

[35] Digest of Soviet press, 28 December 1968, PREM13/3030.

[36] Palliser to Maitland, 2 January 1969, and Brighty to Palliser, 7 January 1969, ibid.

they could not. A diplomat with long Asian experience, Addis wrote to a FCO colleague in December 1967 expressing concern that the validity of Britain's co-chairmanship was diminishing as a result of the UK 'aligning closely behind the US Government's policy on Vietnam'. This hampered Britain when promoting 'useful initiatives' towards a settlement. The situation was not beyond repair but it needed the UK to distance itself from the United States.[37] In the event nothing really changed over the next year. Nor was it likely to change in 1969 according to the conclusions drawn by the FCO in reappraising Anglo-American relations.[38] By prioritising relations with the US over a peace settlement the British arguably were not living up to their obligations under the 1954 settlement. Then again, neither were the Soviets in supporting North Vietnam with high-tech military aid, including IL-28 jet bombers and MiG fighters.[39]

Nixon's most famous statement during the 1968 election came when he told a rally that he possessed a 'secret plan' to end the war in Vietnam.[40] According to Stanley Karnow, Nixon may have been misquoted (a 'rookie wire-service reporter' may have put a 'jazzy lead' on his account).[41] In the view of other historians, Nixon's catch-all rhetoric was the problem and at the least he implied that he personally held the key to bringing the war to a conclusion.[42] Nixon himself later denied that he claimed to possess a formulated plan and that one only took shape once he was in the Oval Office.[43] Whatever the truth, the urgent immediate goal was to pacify

[37] Addis to Wilkinson, 18 December 1967, FCO15/1024.

[38] FCO Planning Staff memorandum, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

[39] Ilya Gaiduk, 'Soviet Policy towards US Participation in the Vietnam War', *History*, Vol. 81, No. 261 (1996), pp.48-50.

[40] Jonathan Aitken *Nixon: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p.416.

[41] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.597.

[42] Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-era Strategy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), p.10; Kevin Ruane, *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930-1975* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.89.

[43] Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (London: Arrow Books, 1979), p.298.

US public opinion, especially the vocal anti-war element which had proven to be such a thorn in Johnson's side. But no matter how the ultimate goal was packaged, Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his National Security Advisor, were determined to end US involvement in Vietnam while simultaneously avoiding defeat.[44]

In his early statements as President, Nixon refused to be drawn on the details of his approach. At a news conference on 27 January, he stated that the US negotiating position in the Paris peace process was based on an armistice, mutual and guaranteed withdrawal of both US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam, the exchange of prisoners of war, and gradual progress on a political settlement.[45] As such, the Nixon administration's outlook chimed with the Wilson government's hopes for a negotiated solution to the war.[46]

At the start of February 1969, Nixon announced that he would soon be visiting Western Europe to 'underline… [his] commitment' to close relations. He would use the French leg of his trip 'to review intensively the Paris peace talks' in consultation with Henry Cabot Lodge who was leading the American delegation.[47] Privately, Nixon wrote to Wilson to say that his visit to London was also 'crucial' because he was 'intent on upholding the close relationship that… [had] long existed between British Prime Ministers and American Presidents'. In appearance, the "special relationship" seemed safe.[48]

By mid-February, the lack of progress in the Paris negotiations had become a concern for the Wilson government. Speaking to the Cabinet the Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart

[44] Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, p.11.

[45] Nixon news conference, 27 January 1969, *Public Papers of the Presidents online* (hereafter *PPPUS*), doc. 10.

[46] Murray to Campbell, 25 November 1968, FCO15/1022.

[47] Nixon news conference, 6 February 1969, *PPPUS*, doc. 35.

[48] Nixon to Wilson, 3 February 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-76*, Vol. 41, 'Western Europe/NATO' (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2012, hereafter *FRUS 1969-76* and volume), doc. 309.

reported that the talks remained in the 'Propaganda Stage' with both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, the formal name of North Vietnam) and the NLF focused on making speeches intended to cause difficulties for the other side.[49] Lodge in fact was so frustrated by this posing that he wrote privately to Nixon seeking authorisation for secret parallel talks with the North Vietnamese to break through the propaganda barrier but Nixon was not yet ready for that kind of initiative.[50]

The British government became involved in the Paris process after approving a visit to the UK by Madame Nguyen Thi Binh, deputy leader of the NLF delegation in Paris, so she could participate in a rally of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). The Cabinet hoped to use her visit to persuade Madame Binh to take a more constructive view on the de-escalation of the Vietnam war.[51] However, with the announcement of Nixon's visit, FCO officials grew nervous about the implications for Anglo-American relations of Binh's presence in Britain.[52] A brief for the Foreign Secretary noted that the 'very close relationship' which the UK government had with the US under the previous Democratic administration was already showing signs of 'fading' under the Republicans.[53] As the earlier FCO stocktake observed, this was possibly inevitable in light of the wider shift in American foreign policy towards improved relations with the communist giants, particularly the push for détente with the USSR.[54] The Nixon administration hoped that friendlier relations with the PRC and USSR would have a positive impact on the Vietnam situation if Moscow and Beijing were persuaded to abandon North Vietnam or press it to make concessions in Paris in order to improve relations with the

[49] UK National Archives, Kew, London, Cabinet records/conclusions, CC(69)8, 11 February 1969, CAB128/44.

[50] Lodge to Nixon, 12 February 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, 'Vietnam 1969-1970' (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 20.

[51] CC(69)8, 11 February 1969, CAB128/44.

[52] FCO memorandum, 20 February 1969, FCO15/1031.

[53] Ibid, 17 February 1969, ibid.

[54] FCO Planning Staff memorandum on Anglo-US Relations, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

United States. However, even if Anglo-American relations were at risk of downgrading by Washington, the FCO saw no reason to speed the process by appearing to sympathise with the Vietnamese communists by hosting Madame Binh.[55]

FCO officials were also disturbed when the Americans put the question of British flag shipping on the agenda for the Nixon. This had been a 'serious issue' in Anglo-American relations during the Johnson years when the Americans had insisted that the UK cease all trade with North Vietnam. With the UK economy in difficulty, trade was a vital question. However, while successfully limiting direct trade with North Vietnam from 1966, the Wilson government had less control over ships flying the British flag but operating under different national direction. In the event, Nixon would not make shipping an issue during his visit but it would remain a bone of contention between the two countries.[56]

Nixon arrived in London on 24 February 1969 and told reporters on at Heathrow airport that 'no two nations in the world more commonly and more closely share the means of communication than do the United States and the United Kingdom. We share a common language. We share the common law. We share great institutions of the Parliament. We share other institutions'.[57] Speaking to the Cabinet, Stewart said the President's outlook marked an 'excellent start'.[58] Privately, when Nixon met Wilson, he thanked him for the 'courage' he had shown in backing the US on Vietnam in the face of domestic criticism including from within the parliamentary Labour party whose far-left was very anti-American.[59]

The Vietnam phase of the Wilson-Nixon talks was dominated by the possibility of a North Vietnamese offensive against South Vietnam, with Hanoi perhaps seeking to strengthen

[55] FCO memorandum, 17 February 1969, FCO15/1031.

[56] FCO brief, 19 February 1969, ibid.

[57] Nixon news conference, 24 February 1969, *PPPUS*, doc. 71.

[58] CC(69)10, 27 February 1969, CAB128/44.

[59] Palliser to Maitland, 27 February 1969, FCO15/1031.

its negotiating position with battlefield success. The President assured the Prime Minister that he had no intention of resuming the bombing of North Vietnam, which Johnson had halted the year before, even though Wilson indicated support for such a measure in retaliation for DRV provocation. Once again, the contradiction in UK policy is apparent: on the one hand, as the upholder of the 1954 settlement, Britain ought not to have taken sides, in this case Wilson backing a resumption of Rolling Thunder, the sustained bombing of North Vietnam; on the other hand, the importance of close relations with the new US administration led to a policy of backing not challenging American policy.[60]

On the face of it the Nixon visit provided public confirmation that the UK-US relationship remained close. But less than a month later Nixon told John Freeman, the British Ambassador to Washington, that henceforward references to the existence of the "special relationship" should be 'played down' in public to avoid damaging America's relations with other key allies.[61] As often in the post-1945 era, when the British sought an open declaration of specialness the most the Americans were prepared to offer was private closeness. On this occasion, Britain's imminent bid to enter the EEC may have offered additional reason for American coolness. The UK's first bid failed largely because the French saw British closeness to America as a means by which American influence would be brought into the heart of the European community. Keeping quiet about the "special relationship" may have been designed by Nixon to aid Britain's prospects for EEC entry, which was a US objective.[62]

Nixon claimed he wanted Anglo-American relations to remain intimate and he promised to 'consult fully' with the British in private on matters of international importance.[63] This, too, was not a new departure by a US President in dealing with a British Prime Minister.

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Nixon-Freeman meeting, 17 March 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 41, doc. 313.

[62] FCO Planning Staff memorandum on Anglo-US Relations, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

[63] Nixon-Freeman meeting, 17th March 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 41, doc. 313.

Back in 1953, when Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower entered the White House, he disappointed Winston Churchill by refusing to make any public declaration of the importance of US-UK relations to America's foreign policy. Privately, Eisenhower said, there would be intimate consultation, and Churchill had to be content with that.[64] As we will see, Eisenhower was mostly true to his promise but Nixon was not. In March 1969, the British were not informed in any way about the start of the US bombing – operation Menu – of Cambodia; but equally, the bombing was kept secret from all of America's allies.[65]

The Nixon administration toyed with several strategies for ending US involvement in the Vietnam war. Vietnamization, the staged withdrawal of US ground troops (and eventually air and naval forces) and their replacement with an expanded ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) paid for by America and provided with massive firepower, emerged as an early preference.[66] Pacification (the holding of countryside won back from the communists) was also to be handed over to the South Vietnamese. At the international level, the Nixon administration hoped that its wider objective of détente would speed the Vietnam peace process. At the same time, the US wanted to be able to apply military pressure on North Vietnam through such operations as the bombing of Cambodia to increase America's chances of gaining honourable peace terms in Paris.[67]

Vietnamization gained momentum in the spring when Kissinger ordered the State Department and Pentagon to prepare a timetable for 'Vietnamizing the war.[68] At the same time, publicly, the administration stuck to its position of peace with honor which meant keeping up

[64] Kevin Ruane, *Churchill and the Bomb in War and Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp.219-220.

[65] Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975* (London: Collins, 2018), p.476.

[66] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.89.

[67] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.73; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pp.50-52.

[68] NSSM 36, 10 April 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, doc. 58.

the fight on both the battlefield and negotiating table.[69] As the FCO noted, the purpose of the administration's publicity at this time was to maintain 'cautious optimism' about the future and thus to keep anti-war protest neutralised in America.[70] Vietnamization was part of this optimism push. In June, Nixon met South Vietnam's President Thieu on Midway Island and announced an 'immediate redeployment from Vietnam of a [US] division equivalent of approximately 25,000 men'. More US withdrawals would follow in keeping with the build-up of the ARVN.[71] The following week, Nixon wrote to Wilson adding some detail. The British had not been consulted, or even asked for an opinion despite Nixon's promise when he was in London at the start of the year. The UK had been told about a major US policy decision only after the decision had been concretized.[72] This left Wilson with little choice other than to express 'understanding and sympathy' for America efforts to disentangle themselves from Vietnam.[73]

Nixon and Wilson were next scheduled to meet in person in August when Nixon stopped over at RAF Mildenhall on the way home from a trip to Romania. Ahead of the meeting, Wilson was advised by Crawford Maclehose, British Ambassador to South Vietnam, to 'just listen' if the President referred to Vietnam, but if he felt the need to speak he should limit himself to a 'word of encouragement'.[74] Here, perhaps, is further proof of Britain's diminished ability to influence US policy, not only in Vietnam but more generally too. It also confirms the contradiction in the UK position: an official promoter of peace thanks to the

[69] USIS memorandum, 5 May 1969, PREM13/3030.

[70] Brighty to Youde, 8 May 1969, ibid.

[71] Nixon-Thieu news conference, 8 June 1969, *PPPUS*.

[72] Youde to Barrington and enclosure, and Nixon to Wilson, 14 June 1969, FCO15/1093

[73] Youde to Barrington, 14 June 1969, ibid.

[74] Saigon Embassy telegram 421 to FCO, 1 August 1969, FCO15/1031.

legacy of 1954, it had become, as the FCO's January review put it, an 'instrument of American purpose' making resistance to US war policy difficult.[75]

When the two met, Wilson went beyond the advice given to him and assured Nixon of his full support in seeking an honourable exit from the war. The alternative – simply quitting Vietnam and seeing the communists win – risked losing all of Southeast Asia and a very damaging shift in the Cold War balance of power.[76] In September, the FCO restated its backing for the Nixon administration's search for a peace that helped contain communism in Southeast Asia, blamed the communists for the deadlock in Paris, and implied that if the US was ever forced to resume bombing of North Vietnam the responsibility would lay with Hanoi's intransigence.[77]

Meanwhile American assessments of the prospects for Vietnamization were upbeat. In September, Melvin Laird, the Secretary of Defense (who had come up with the word 'Vietnamization' as an improvement on 'de-Americanization'), drew Nixon's attention to good progress as more and more American ground forces were brought home.[78] On the US domestic front, Vietnamization was popular with many ordinary Americans even if anti-war activists criticised the policy as continuing the war just with less US deaths.[79] To Laird, however, the key to continued public support was ongoing progress on Vietnamization, as point he made to Nixon.[80] Soon after, Nixon announced that 60,000 US troops would be withdrawn by the end of the year (taking the 549,500 he had inherited down below the half-a-million mark) and further would follow in 1970.[81] Kissinger had a concern, however. Rising public expectations

[75] FCO Planning Staff memorandum, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

[76] Wilson-Nixon talks, 3 August 1969, FCO15/1031.

[77] FCO brief, 16 September 1969, FCO15/1017.

[78] Laird to Nixon, 4 September 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, doc. 114.

[79] Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p.611

[80] Laird to Nixon, 4 September 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, doc. 114.

[81] Nixon news conference, 16 September 1969, *PPPUS*, doc. 361.

might force the administration to withdraw faster than the military situation safely allowed, thus handing over to the untested ARVN too soon. Vietnamization was like giving 'salted peanuts' to the public; the more troops withdrawn, the more they wanted.[82]

By September, continuing anti-war activity in the United States, despite the launch of Vietnamization, disturbed Nixon.[83] According to the UK Embassy in Washington, Nixon, fearful that domestic protest could damage his administration in the way it had Johnson's, was giving 'earnest' thought to whether the US should re-focus most of its energy on seeking a speedy negotiated settlement by ending the Paris stalemate.[84] Ambassador Freeman spoke to Kissinger. The President wanted a 'diplomatic and propaganda campaign' to put 'moral pressure' on the North Vietnamese to take a more positive attitude in Paris, Kissinger said. A UK contribution to this campaign would be an 'important gesture of solidarity'. The FCO agreed that a signal of moral support would be well received by Nixon who was considered 'responsive to such gestures'. At the level of broad policy, Britain was already supporting US efforts to end the war and FCO policymakers now agreed that a 'substantive' show of support would be helpful to harmonious Anglo-American relations. According to Freeman, a declaration of UK faith in the administration's approach, including a public statement that the US had gone 'beyond expectations' in trying to end the war, might even lessen domestic anti-war criticism of Nixon.[85]

The British effort was to be fronted by the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary even though on past precedent it seemed bound to draw the anger of the DRV at the way that the

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[82] Kissinger to Nixon, 10 September 1969, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, doc. 117.

[83] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp.169-170.

[84] Washington Embassy telegram 2487 to FCO, 12 September 1969, FCO15/1068.

[85] FCO telegram 1980 to Washington Embassy, 17 September 1969, and Freeman to Greenhill, 29 September 1969, PREM13/3030; Washington Embassy telegram 2739 to FCO, 9 October 1969, FCO15/1068; FCO32/376 Barrington to Youde, 10 October 1969, FCO15/1041,

UK, in theory a neutral mediator due to Geneva 1954, was taking the American side.[86] However, a pro-US public relations exercise was considered all the more necessary by the FCO in view of the actions of a group of Labour MPs whose sympathies lay with the US anti-war movement. The day after the Vietnam Moratorium of 15 October 1969 – which witnessed mass anti-war gatherings not just in America but around the world – Labour dissenters tabled a motion in parliament echoing the demands of the US anti-war movement and calling on the government to break with the Nixon administration if there was no peace by the end of the year. Despite this, the Wilson government remained publicly steadfast in support of the United States and declared its confidence that the President would see the war through to a satisfactory conclusion.[87]

What the British did not know – nor anyone beyond a handful of key individuals in the Nixon-Kissinger inner circle – was that Kissinger had recently begun top secret meetings in Paris with DRV figures, most notably Politburo members Xuan Thy and Le Duc Tho, outside of the formal public peace process in the hope that out of the glare of the media some serious diplomacy would be possible. In the event, this parallel "back-channel" US-DRV peace process would prove to be as ineffective as the public process for more than two years.[88]

By November Nixon was feeling 'besieged' by domestic critics.[89] Once again, the US administration expressed a desire for a statement of support from its closest ally, Britain. Nixon was due to deliver a major televised address on Vietnam and the State Department asked the FCO to persuade the Prime Minister to make a statement backing the President. Wilson,

[86] Saigon Embassy telegram 534 to FCO, 30 September 1969, FCO15/1068.

[87] Gordon to Fingland, 16 October 1969, FCO15/1041.

[88] Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: the Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: Routledge 2004), pp.26-42.

[89] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.175.

however, refused to endorse Nixon's statement without knowing its contents. It is a measure of how much the Americans needed international backing that Kissinger swiftly provided Wilson with a summary.[90] Wilson, satisfied, went on to express publicly his admiration for Nixon's 'determination to seek an honourable conclusion' to the war – but he waited a week before doing so.[91]

In his own address, Nixon spoke directly to what he called 'the great silent majority of my fellow Americans', those who had not joined the anti-war movement and though worried about Vietnam were loyally supporting the President. Nixon reminded his audience that he was determined 'to end the war in a way that we could win the peace'. With Vietnamization, 'I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed'. In the previous Democratic administration, 'we Americanized the war' but in his administration 'we are Vietnamizing the search for peace'. He ended by declaring that 'North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that'.[92]

The UK government used America's need for British support at this juncture to press an idea on Washington. The time had come, policymakers felt, for a new approach on Vietnam, with the UK working with the USSR to persuade Hanoi to take the peace process seriously.[93] The Nixon administration appeared to agree. At any rate, the Wilson government was praised for its constructive approach, and Wilson thanked for his supportive statement. Was this an example of constructive Anglo-American policymaking in action? Possibly but only up to a point as Nixon insisted that any UK approach to Hanoi, with or without Moscow's assent, be

[90] FCO telegrams 2333 and 2342 to Washington Embassy, 1 November 1969, PREM13/3030; Washington Embassy telegram 2998 to FCO, 3 November 1969, FCO15/1068.

[91] FCO telegram 2413 to Washington Embassy, 11 November 1969, FCO15/1068.

[92] Nixon speech, 3 November 1969, *PPPUS*, document 425.

[93] Gordon to Fingland, 4 November 1969, FCO15/1068; FCO telegram 2358 to Washington Embassy, 5 November 1969, PREM13/3030.

undertaken as a 'general endorsement' of the correctness of American policy and a reproach to the North Vietnamese.[94]

This explicitly pro-US approach was not what the FCO had in mind. Historian John Young has argued that after the Tet Offensive of 1968, Wilson did not face any 'serious difficulty' over Vietnam until April 1970.[95] This would not appear to be the case. Throughout the latter half of 1969, the British government found itself in an increasingly difficult situation. On the one hand, it sought to back US Vietnam policy to buttress all-round Anglo-American relations; on the other hand, it sought to be loyal to its 1954 Geneva obligations. It was a tricky balancing act. Closeness to America brought criticism from within the parliamentary Labour party and sections of popular opinion while an overly assertive approach to upholding the 1954 settlement risked antagonising the Americans. The FCO eventually agreed on an initial cautious sounding-out of the USSR via a personal message from the Prime Minister to his counterpart in Moscow, Alexei Kosygin. The message was delivered to the Kremlin on 14 November. It was received coldly. Expressing his disappointment that America's primary interest was not peace but a continuation of the war with 'Vietnamese fighting Vietnamese', Kosygin said he would provide a detailed response in due course.[96]

As November came to a close, Freeman returned to London to meet with Wilson and discuss 'the state of feeling' in the US before the Prime Minister's visit to Washington, which was scheduled for early 1970. According to Freeman, the Americans 'much appreciated' UK support on Vietnam and hoped it would continue. This was useful for the Wilson government to know especially as it was likely that Nixon would win a second term and the Republicans be in power for another seven years.[97] Freeman's main US source of information was the US

[94] Washington Embassy telegram 3090 to FCO, 11 November 1969, FCO15/1068.

[95] Young, *International Policy*, p.81.

[96] Moscow Embassy telegram 1262 to FCO, 14 November 1969, PREM13/3030.

[97] Youde to Graham, 25 November 1969, PREM13/3022.

Secretary of State William Rogers, supposedly a 'close confidant' of the President. We now know that Rogers was not appointed by Nixon for his competence. As Karnow notes, it was in fact Rogers' 'unfamiliarity' with international affairs that got him the job in that this guaranteed that key foreign policy making would be dominated by the White House. The State Department, the main UK source of information on Vietnam, was side-lined.[98]

Kosygin replied formally to Wilson's letter on 3 December. Acknowledging UK concern over the stalemate situation in Paris, the Soviet leader 'could not fail to notice' that the UK had not changed its policy towards American intervention in Vietnam. Kosygin suggested that if, as Wilson argued, 'all should seek to contribute to a negotiated political settlement', the UK should take a more 'realistic' stance. In other words, Britain should put its 'moral obligations' as Geneva co-chair ahead of the "special relationship". Until it did that, multilateral action between the 1954 co-chairs would not be possible.[99]

A few days later, to Nixon's 'personal appreciation', Wilson again prioritised Anglo-American relations by openly defending US policy and reiterating Britain's support for Nixon's 'determination to seek an honourable negotiated settlement'.[100] As we know, Nixon's "peace with honor" meant, in its most basic form, an end to the war on terms favourable to the United States. But was peace on these terms in keeping with the legacy of 1954? This issue, raised in 1969, would continue to complicate UK policy and Anglo-American relations in 1970.

[98] Karnow, *Vietnam,* pp.602-603; Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War 1945-2000* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p.275.

[99] Kosygin to Wilson, 3rd December 1969, PREM13/3552.

[100] FCO telegram 2629 to Washington Embassy, 8 December 1969, FCO15/1069; Washington Embassy telegram 3418 to FCO, 9 December 1969, PREM13/3552.

CHAPTER TWO

UK Indochina policy: from Labour to Conservative, 1970

By the start of 1970 over 100,000 American troops had been withdrawn as part of the Vietnamization prowess while the ARVN had been expanded. In Paris, however, the peace negotiations, which paralleled the ongoing war in South Vietnam, were bogged down. When Lodge resigned as leader of the US delegation in Paris in December 1969, Nixon, in a show of frustration, delayed replacing him for several months.[101]

Writing in the *New York Times*, James Reston concluded that 'Nixon had dealt more effectively with the politics of his problems than with the problems themselves' in his first year in office. In other words, Nixon handled Vietnam by using what today we would call "spin", but he was a long way from solving the problem.[102] In Washington, the British Embassy felt that Reston 'underestimated' the importance of the politics of Vietnam. Previous Presidents had used Vietnam as the 'starting point' of their administration's policy, attempting to 'drag' public opinion along. Nixon had 'reversed the formula' to focus on the greater crisis, the 'strain' imposed on 'American institutions', thereby shaping Vietnam policy on public opinion. The Embassy thought this a clever approach. Domestic opposition, 'all but intolerable' in the late-LBJ period, had turned into something 'much less than a total obsession'.[103] In London, this report was regarded as useful by FCO planners preparing for the Prime Minister's visit to Washington.[104]

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[101] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.618; Nixon to Lodge, 20 November 1970, *PPPUS*.

[102] Freeman to Stewart, 7 January 1970, FCO15/1346.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Fingland to Tomlinson, 19 January 1970, ibid.

The general outlook for the Nixon-Wilson talks was reasonably promising. The more the two leaders could meet to 'talk, know and understand one another' the better, Freeman argued.[105] Nixon appeared to share this view. The FCO Planning Staff thought that the President was 'very well disposed towards Britain' and considered that his administration enjoyed 'more intimate relations with Britain than with any other foreign country'. The primary objective of the Wilson visit should be to strengthen the 'present relations of trust and intimacy' and 'make the fullest use of the President's goodwill'.[106] Across the Atlantic, Kissinger maintained that the 'special relationship' was evidenced by the number and range of US-UK contacts and by the 'broad consensus shared on substance' which these demonstrated.[107]

British optimism diminished when, just a week before Wilson's Washington visit, the US authorities 'urgently' raised the question of British flag shipping. The *Vergmont*, a 'genuinely British' ship, was reported to be on its way to Haiphong, the DRV's main port. The Americans wanted the ship stopped en route. The 'estimated arrival date', Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart conceded, 'is very unfortunate'. Communist propaganda about the *Vergmont* might arouse criticism in America. However, there was a limit to how far the government could impede the freedom of British commerce and Stewart advised Wilson that 'some reactions from Congress and others in the United States' was to be expected.[108] In the event, the *Vergmont* avoided Haiphong, but as the *Times* editorialized, the Vietnam war 'remains…the biggest source of poison in international relations' and, by extension, Anglo-American relations.[109]

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[105] Alex Spelling, '"A Reputation for Parsimony to Uphold": Harold Wilson, Richard Nixon and the Re-valued "Special Relationship"', *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2013), p.15.

[106] FCO briefs for Washington visit, 23 January 1970, FCO7/1779.

[107] Spelling, '"Reputation for Parsimony"', p.15.

[108] Stewart to Wilson, 20 January 1970, PREM13/3552.

[109] Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), p.944; *Times*, 26 January 1970.

Wilson received a warm reception on arrival in the United States on 27 January. Nixon greeted him as an 'old friend…not only in government' but 'personally'. A 'great deal is possible' when the UK and US were 'together', he added.[110] Wilson, for his part, called the visit 'by far the best…I have had' to America.[111] Back in London on 5 February, he told Cabinet colleagues that American policymakers 'clearly set considerable store by the advice and information which British Ministers and British diplomatic representatives abroad could give them'. More specifically, he had been 'impressed and reassured' by Nixon's 'determination to persist in his policy of Vietnamisation'.[112] Some Cabinet ministers thought that Wilson exaggerated how well he got on with the President, and when Labour lost the June 1970 General Election and Edward Heath and the Conservatives took office, Nixon was reportedly 'pleased'.[113]

Be that as it may, the Nixon-Wilson summit covered the full field of international relations.[114] When the talks focused on Vietnam, Wilson was pleased to learn that US assessments were hopeful. Aside from Vietnamization, US troop withdrawals and the resulting downturn in American casualties, 'the biggest blow we have struck', the President said, 'is the muting of American dissent'. In other words the quieting down of the previously vociferous anti-war movement.[115] Later, the *Times* sounded a note of caution which Wilson might have heeded. With regard to Vietnamization, 'success…is not nearly so assured as most people

[110] Nixon statement, 27 January 1970, *PPPUS.*

[111] Young, *International Policy*, p.23.

[112] CC(70)6, 5 February 1970, CAB128/45.

[113] Young, *International Policy*, p.23.

[114] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p.947.

[115] Wilson-Nixon Meeting, 27 January 1970, FCO15/1346; Kissinger record of talks, Washington, 27-28 January 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 41, doc. 320.

appear to assume. The possibility of failure is very real…North Vietnam will not negotiate if the Vietnamization policy is a success, and there will be no need for negotiations if it fails'.[116]

In the Paris peace process, the chances of a breakthrough remained remote entering 1970. 'Traditionally', historian Yoshihiko Mizumoto writes, British Prime Ministers had been 'crucial…in opening negotiations with the communists'. Examples of the UK taking the lead in Cold War diplomacy went back to Attlee and Bevin in the late 1940s and Churchill and Eden in the 1950s. Now, in 1970, Wilson 'attached great significance to the Anglo-Soviet…co-chairmanship of the Geneva conference of 1954' and this offered the prospect of a UK part in forwarding the negotiations.[117]

The problem for the British, to judge from Wilson's insights gained in Washington, was that the Americans did not seem to want their help. 'We are not approaching the Russians on Vietnam', Nixon told Wilson. 'To do so is an exercise in futility. They can't afford to appear not to support Hanoi'. On Vietnam, 'our best position is to accept Russian help, but not to ask for it. They won't help us because we ask them; they will help us because they will face the necessity'. This last remark hinted at linkage. If the Soviets wanted a Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT, one of Nixon's top goals as he sought to develop détente), they might have to give the United States something in return, possibly leaning on North Vietnam to be more constructive in Paris. While the Americans waited for the Soviets, one of the 1954 Geneva co-chairs, to come round, there was still an opportunity for the other chair, the UK, to be proactive. This seems to be the conclusion Wilson drew.[118] But was it a real or an imagined opportunity? Martin Luther King Jr. once remarked of Nixon that up close 'he almost disarms you with his

[116] *Times*, 28 January 1970.

[117] Yoshihiko Mizumoto, 'Harold Wilson's Efforts at a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War, 1965-67', *Electronic Journal of International History*, Vol 9 (2005), pp.3-4.

[118] Wilson-Nixon Meeting, 27 January 1970, FCO15/1346; Kissinger record of talks, Washington, 27-28 January 1970, *FRUS 1969-76 online*, Vol. 41, doc. 320.

apparent sincerity'.[119] Had Wilson been duped? Time would tell whether there was substance to the "special relationship" under Nixon. On the face of it, though, all was well as the President publicly toasted the 'personal friendship' between himself and Wilson.[120]

The most dramatic development in Indochina in 1970 came not in Vietnam but in Cambodia. In March, Norodom Sihanouk, the neutralist Cambodian leader, was overthrown in a coup d'état by Army General Lon Nol.[121] Following the coup, the new government abandoned Cambodia's previous neutrality and called on the United States for assistance in eliminating the North Vietnamese military presence which had built up inside its territory in the borderlands close to South Vietnam and had been hitherto tolerated by Sihanouk.[122] In Washington, Lon Nol's accession was welcomed by the Nixon administration. Hitherto, because of Cambodia's neutrality, US operations in the country in connection with the war in Vietnam had been ultra-secret (operation Menu, for example). Now Nixon prepared for open American intervention.[123] 'If Cambodia becomes a Communist base, Vietnamization becomes impossible', he insisted. A 'bold move' was needed to boost the country's security.[124]

As the Cambodian situation developed, the British weighed their obligations under the 1954 Geneva agreement. According to a FCO position paper, the UK was supportive of American policy in Vietnam but 'anxious' that the problems in Cambodia, and Laos, be ring-fenced from Vietnam and 'resolved peacefully'. The British should therefore seek to use their influence as co-chair of the Geneva conference to effect a peaceful resolution, to that end, seek

[119] Timothy Naftali, 'The President and the Apprentice', *New York Times*, 11 September 2015.

[120] Wilson and Nixon Toasts, 27 January 1970, *PPPUS*.

[121] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.91.

[122] R. B. Smith, 'The International Setting of the Cambodia Crisis, 1969-1970', *International History Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1996), pp.321-322.

[123] Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p.465; Kissinger to Nixon, 19 March 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, doc. 205, and note 1, Nixon comment.

[124] Nixon to Kissinger, 22 April 1970, ibid, doc. 245.

to work with the USSR, the other guardian of the 1954 agreement.[125] The Americans, however, were not interested. On 30 April, Nixon announced that US forces had entered Cambodia at the request of the Lon Nol government. He justified the move on the grounds that clearing North Vietnamese sanctuaries would prevent the DRV using Cambodia as a springboard for a major attack on South Vietnam and so protect the timetable for US troop withdrawals and Vietnamization.[126]

This made military logic to the Nixon, but the antiwar movement in the United States was outraged. Here was a President who had pledged to end the war in Vietnam escalating it into another country. In consequence, Nixon's announcement triggered a 'rush of protest' which took a tragic turn at Kent State university, Ohio, and Jackson State university in Mississippi, when National Guard units fired on protesters, killing six young people.[127] At the same time, opinion polls indicated significant retained support for Nixon amongst the "silent majority" of conservative Americans. The US Congress, however, was outraged by what it saw as an abuse of the President's authority both as Commander-in-Chief and under the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution. Consequently, Congress revoked the resolution and ordered Nixon to cease the Cambodian intervention by 1 June regardless of whether its objectives had been achieved. Congress also legislated against any Presidential deployment of US ground troops in operations in Southeast Asia beyond South Vietnam, although in specifying ground troops rather than military action in all forms Congress inadvertently permitted the secret bombing of Cambodia to continue for a time.[128]

In London, the FCO watched events closely. The Cambodian crisis posed a dilemma. On the one hand, UK support for the US administration would strengthen Nixon's standing at

[125] FCO brief, 13 April 1970, FCO15/1354.

[126] Nixon address to the nation, 30 April 1970, *PPPUS*.

[127] Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p.248

[128] Nixon, *Memoirs*, pp.466-467; Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.92.

home and be appreciated by the White House. On the other hand, public support for Nixon on Cambodia would be supporting a policy that many people in Britain and Western Europe, never mind America, considered to be 'manifestly wrong'. Equally, a UK failure to back the United States in this moment of need, if it was matched by other US allies, would encourage North Vietnam to fight harder for military victory and therefore damage the chances of negotiated settlement which was the UK goal. Finally, UK disassociation from the US was bound to have 'profound consequences' on Anglo-American relations across the spectrum.[129]

In Washington, Nixon was desperate for international support. At one point, he instructed Kissinger to call in 'some of the lily-livered Ambassadors from our so-called friends in the world', and included the British Ambassador in this category. 'We are going to find out who our friends are now, because if we decide to stand up here some of the rest of them had better come along fast'.[130] On 30 April, the day the US invasion was announced, the British Cabinet met. US forces had crossed into Cambodia with the object of destroying North Vietnamese bases, Stewart explained, but it was unclear whether the American move was a 'once-for-all operation or whether it would continue'. The UK government needed to work out its position and Stewart's view was that 'categorical statements' in support or opposition to US policy 'should be avoided'. There was no question of open disassociation, he told ministers, but 'we should be equally careful not to endorse the action they had taken, especially in view of our position as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference'. Stewart recommended – and the Cabinet agreed – that any public statement be limited to stressing that events demonstrated 'the importance of a political settlement'. Britain could play a diplomatic role by working for the reconvening of Geneva Conference as a forum for working out a settlement for all Indochina.[131]

[129] FCO position paper, n.d., April 1970, FCO15/1354.

[130] Nixon-Kissinger meeting, 22 April 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 6, doc. 245.

[131] Ibid.

However, when the government's fence-sitting was made public, Labour left-winger Michael Foot was outraged and demanded that parliament give 'urgent consideration' to the need for 'immediate…diplomatic action, including strong protests' against the US invasion. Sufficient MPs agreed with Foot for a full-scale debate to be scheduled for 5 May.[132]

On the morning of the debate, the Cabinet met again. Stewart reported that the Soviet government was unwilling to work with the UK in a joint bid to reconvene the Geneva conference. Looking ahead to the debate, there were two aspects to consider. The first was a call by the Labour left for diplomatic action to ease the situation; this could and was being supported, said Stewart. The second was Foot's insistence that the government publicly condemn the actions of the Nixon administration. Clearly, Stewart said, it was not possible to criticise the Americans in this way and he proposed to tell parliament that the areas in which the US was operating had been occupied by the North Vietnamese and that there was some legitimacy in cleansing these zones of communist influence.[133]

In discussion, the Cabinet weighed the implications for Anglo-American relations. The Americans 'were our allies', it was pointed out, and 'we had an overriding interest in the maintenance of the Atlantic Alliance and of a United States presence in Europe'. But what would happen if the government did as Foot wanted and condemned the Americans? In answering this question, Cabinet ministers expressed a fear that had haunted all British governments since the end of the Second World War, namely that speaking out risked 'provoking a reaction in the United States in favour of isolationism, which would be very damaging to our interests in the longer term'.[134]

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[132] Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, hereafter *HCD*, Vol. 801, cols 36-37, 4 May 1970.

[133] CC(70)20, 5 May 1970, CAB128/45.

[134] Ibid.

In the end, the Foreign Secretary undertook to remind parliament that the government had consistently argued that a military solution of the Vietnam war was not possible and had already taken several diplomatic initiatives to help bring about a negotiated peace. But it was important not to let the communists off the hook. Despite the Nixon administration's troop withdrawals, there had been 'no corresponding response by the Government of North Vietnam and the other Communist elements in South-East Asia, either at the conference table in Paris or in the war theatre in Vietnam'. Apart from this, Stewart saw no reason to explain or justify the United States incursion and, as already agreed, he would avoid expressing either approval or condemnation. As the Cabinet drew to an end the Prime Minster said that he would close the debate in parliament and 'stress the deep apprehension which was felt, not only in this country but throughout the world, about recent developments in Indo-China, which had potential implications extending far beyond South-East Asia itself'. As to the Cambodian crisis, Wilson agreed that 'our attitude should be one of detachment' and 'in this spirit he would propose to refer to the possibility of our promoting action by the United Nations, to our position as co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference and to our determination to play an active role in continuing to seek a negotiated solution through these or any other appropriate channels'.[135]

In the debate, Stewart said that America could not be 'absolutely bound' by a neutrality which had 'ceased to have real effect' in Cambodia. When he refused to condemn the US invasion, however, he was heckled by some MPs from his own backbenches. 'It seems to me that the task of this country is to assert and to continue the work for a policy of an agreed and negotiated solution,' he retorted. When Wilson spoke, it was to express the hope that Washington would not reverse its withdrawal plans and Vietnamisation. But he too avoided specific criticism of US intervention.[136]

[135] Ibid.

[136] Hansard, *HCD*, Vol. 801, cols 208-70, 5 May 1970.

Afterwards, Nixon thanked Wilson and Stewart for their support (although a close reading of what they said in parliament showed equivocation not backing).[137] The *Times* was more accurate in referring to the government's 'qualified' and 'muted' support for Nixon's policy.[138] If the government's balancing act satisfied the White House, it did not placate the Labour left, and while the government survived the division (with a 278-68 vote in its favour), a significant number of Labour MPs lodged protest votes.[139] In retrospect, Wilson's vague position (neither backing nor condemning US actions) was possibly related to the UK domestic political situation. Two weeks later he called a General Election with the poll set for 18 June. With the prospect of an election in mind, it made political sense for Wilson to adopt a middle-of-the-road position rather than risk alienating sections of the electorate by adopting an explicitly a pro- or anti-American stance.[140]

From a military standpoint, the results of the Cambodian operation were mixed. On the plus side, communist supply lines were disrupted and the Lon Nol regime helped to stay in power. Against this, the invasion prompted a resurgence of anti-war protests in America and led to Congressional criticism and curbs.[141] In the UK, when the Congressional deadline for American withdrawal from Cambodia arrived in June, Wilson's time as Prime Minister was almost up. In the event, it was Edward Heath and the Conservatives who triumphed in the election.[142] Nixon seems to have been pleased by this outcome. Despite frequent statements of the close personal bond he shared with Wilson, Nixon found Heath more congenial politically.

[137] Spelling, '"Reputation for Parsimony"', p.17.

[138] *Times*, 6 May 1970.

[139] Craig Wilson, 'Rhetoric, Reality and Dissent: The Vietnam Policy of the British Labour Government, 1964–1970', *Social Science Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1986), p.27.

[140] *Times*, 19 May 1970.

[141] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.93.

[142] Spelling, '"Reputation for Parsimony"', p.11.

'There was no foreign leader for whom Nixon had a higher regard', recalled Kissinger.[143] The Anglo-American partnership thus appeared strengthened as a result of the British election. However, as time would show, in many respects Heath was 'deeply sceptical about Britain's obsession with America'.[144]

What of Vietnam? What was Labour's legacy to the Tories? The Cambodian episode presented Wilson with the most 'serious difficulty' he had faced on Indochina for some years and exposed (so his critics argued) the limits of his government's commitment to peace.[145] The dilemmas that Indochina posed for Wilson were not purely party-political, however, as Heath would discover. Could or should the UK adopt a policy of total commitment to Geneva 1954 and place itself centre-stage with the USSR as peace-maker? If so, could the UK adopt that role without damaging Anglo-American relations? As Craig Wilson has shown, the Labour leader's 'major difficulty' was that he 'attempted to attain mutually incompatible goals', namely to 'maintain the special relationship' whilst simultaneously 'pressing Washington to stop the war'.[146]

Heath and the Conservatives would also struggle in this regard, but despite Heath's reputation for coolness about the "special relationship", his default position, as we will see, was to support America on Vietnam.

Back in May 1969, Heath had been invited to the White House for talks (treatment Nixon usually reserved for heads of government, not leaders of the opposition). The 'special relationship', Heath told his hosts, 'was no artificial relationship to be created or abandoned at

[143] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.932.

[144] David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: the Relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1988), p.261.

[145] Young, *International Policy*, p.81.

[146] Wilson, 'Rhetoric, Reality and Dissent', p.12

will'. This was welcome news to the United States administration at a time when Britain's value as an ally was in doubt in Washington.[147] The Labour government's earlier withdrawal from "East of Suez", giving up a network of military bases, was seen as a 'serious abdication of responsibilities' at a time when America needed a strong ally in Southeast Asia. The formation of a Conservative government was thus broadly welcomed by US policymakers in offering a new start for Anglo-American relations.[148]

In mid-1970, Kissinger concluded a study of the impact the change of government in Britain would have on US foreign policy. Overall, it was likely to have 'generally favourable implications' with Britain probably adopting 'a more active and positive role' in international policy. Specifically, 'the Heath Government will probably offer more support for our Vietnam policies'. The Nixon administration looked forward to a 'highly constructive and congenial relationship…at every level'.[149] According to Kissinger, Nixon 'wanted nothing so much' with Heath 'as an intimate collaboration of a kind he would not grant to any other foreign leader'.[150] The morning after the UK election, Nixon telephoned Heath to tell him he 'would be a great improvement on the previous government'. He also wanted him to visit Washington as soon as possible.[151] The next month Nixon wrote to 'Ted' to share the 'final report' of the Cambodian operation.[152] Heath in turn assured the President of his 'fullest support' in the search for peace and expressed admiration for the 'firmness and persistence' Nixon had shown on Vietnam.[153]

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[147] Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo–American Relations', p.640.

[148] David Sanders, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy since 1945* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.176.

[149] Kissinger to Nixon, n.d., June 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 41, doc. 326.

[150] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.932.

[151] Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo-American Relations', p.638.

[152] Nixon to Heath, 9 July 1970, PREM15/673.

[153] Heath to Nixon, 10 July 1970, ibid.

During the summer, turmoil in the Middle East deflected Nixon's attention from Vietnam for a time. Nevertheless, ARVN operations continued in Cambodia (without direct US assistance) while military aid to Lon Nol increased.[154] In July, Ambassador Freeman returned to London from Washington to brief the new government on the 'American scene'. Nixon had been taking a 'more detached' attitude to South-East Asia generally, Freeman felt, while in Vietnam the 'basic decisions' had been made that were expected to lead to an 'honourable settlement'. The Cambodian crisis had not altered this. An armistice was a matter of time, and the Americans were content to wait.[155]

In the Paris peace process, Nixon had finally got around to replacing Lodge as Head of the US delegation with David Bruce, a diplomat highly respected in Britain where he had been Ambassador.[156] Nixon was confident that a breakthrough would come sooner rather than later. In a news conference at the end of July he declared that 'the prospects for a negotiated peace should be better now than they were before…as a result of our Cambodian operation…the enemy position is weaker than it was before'.[157]

Three months later, on 7 October, Nixon announced a 'major new initiative for peace'. The 'culmination of a Government-wide effort…on the negotiation front', made possible by the 'remarkable success' of Vietnamization, the initiative consisted of five linked proposals to 'open the door' to an 'enduring peace': an Indochina-wide ceasefire; an international peace conference modelled on Geneva 1954; the withdrawal of all US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam; a DRV commitment to a political settlement guaranteeing the right of self-determination to the people of South Vietnam; and the 'immediate and unconditional'

[154] Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p.252.

[155] Freeman-Heath Meeting, 27 July 1970, PREM15/673.

[156] Bruce obituary, *New York Times*, 6 December 1977.

[157] Nixon news conference, 30 July 1970, *PPPUS*.

release of all POW's.[158] In London, the Conservative government praised a 'comprehensive up-dating' of the US position which seemed likely to be well received by the US public. The only 'disappointment', Freeman noted, was the failure to announce 'accelerated troop withdrawals'.[159] A few days later, Nixon rectified this by ordering the Pentagon 'to reduce the authorized ceiling of our forces in Vietnam by another 40,000 between now and Christmas'. As a result, 'there will be…205,500 fewer Americans in Vietnam by Christmas of this year than when I took office'.[160]

As a possible pointer to the kind of relationship Nixon sought to develop with Heath, an advance copy of his five-point statement had been passed to London by Kissinger with a plea that positive support would be 'greatly appreciated'.[161] The Americans perhaps had learned how to handle Prime Ministers based on the problems experienced with Wilson the previous year. At any rate, it had an effect. On 8 October, the government publicly welcomed Nixon's proposals and expressed the hope that 'positive progress' could be made in the peace process.[162] In addition, the new Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, called on the Soviet Union, as co-chair of Geneva 1954, to 'seize the opportunity' to support the negotiations.[163] Unfortunately, despite what the Foreign Office described as a 'fair and reasonable' request, the USSR refused to comply.[164] By the time the Cabinet discussed Vietnam on 15 October, the North Vietnamese had also rejected both the UK proposal for a revived Geneva conference and Nixon's five-point plan.[165]

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[158] Nixon address to the nation, 7 October 1970, *PPPUS*.

[159] Washington Embassy Telegram 2995 to FCO, 9 October 1970, FCO15/1341.

[160] Nixon statement, 12 October 1970, *PPPUS*.

[161] Washington Embassy telegram 2953 to FCO, 6 October 1970, FCO15/1341.

[162] FCO telegram 2264 to Washington Embassy, 8 October 1970, ibid.

[163] FCO telegram 2282 to Washington Embassy, 9 October 1970, ibid.

[164] Cabinet brief, 15 October 1970, ibid.

[165] CM(70)30, CAB128/47, 15 October 1970.

In autumn 1970, Nixon visited Britain. On 3 October, he and Heath consulted together at Chequers in an atmosphere which the Prime Minister described as 'very cordial'.[166] FCO briefs drawn up ahead of the Nixon visit suggested that the establishment of a strong US-UK relationship was a top Nixon objective. It was hoped that Nixon's already evidenced respect for Heath could be built upon – without using the 'old-fashioned concept' of the "Special Relationship" – to indicate that Britain stands 'closer to the United States than other countries do and are entitled to be treated with the confidence that this demands'.[167]

To judge from what Heath reported to the Cabinet, these predictions were merited. Nixon had 'clearly wished to establish a close relationship' and had discussed policies with 'complete freedom and frankness'. On Vietnam he reaffirmed that troop withdrawals, Vietnamization and the peace process were the main planks of his policy.[168] According to the US record, Nixon was frank on the kind of interaction he wanted with Heath:

> If anything comes up, please call…We will keep things in confidence…The need for communication has never been greater. We will continue to face major problems in the Middle East. SALT is quite undetermined. Tell us where you disagree. We will feel free to ask your advice. We do not want to be the only country making foreign policy. We want your participation east of Suez so that we are not the only non-Asian power present there. The same is true in East-West relations. We will feel free about your relations with the Soviets, and we will keep you informed about ours.[169]

[166] CM(70)26, CAB128/47, 5 October 1970.

[167] FCO memorandum, n.d., October 1970, PREM15/714.

[168] CM(70)26, CAB128/47, 5 October 1970.

[169] Heath-Nixon talks, 3 October 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 41, doc. 329.

Whether this would be the case in practice remained to be seen. On the UK side, Heath wanted to restore the harmony of UK-US relations which he felt had been disturbed under Labour. He was also prepared to back US policy in Indochina for Cold War geo-strategic reasons, namely to prevent the spread of communism across Southeast Asia, even though this was not a domestically popular positon. The Nixon administration had picked up on all this. The "special relationship" not only existed, Kissinger said, but 'continued to flow strong'.[170] However, Kissinger's assessment would soon be put to the test.

Anglo-American leaders met again in December when Nixon had the 'special privilege' of welcoming Heath to the White House for the first time as Prime Minister. As he had done on Wilson's arrival ten months previously, Nixon emphasised the importance of the US-UK relationship.[171] Heath, however, a committed Europhile keen to do nothing to damage the UK chances of entering the EEC after previous failed bids, 'went into extraordinary verbal gymnastics to avoid using the phrase Special Relationship' in case it antagonised the French and other Western Europeans.[172] Instead he spoke of a 'natural relationship'.[173] Heath later maintained that the term 'special relationship' was a flimsy construction that that could be 'broken at a moment's notice' whereas 'natural relationship' reflected the shared culture which had made relations so free-flowing up to this point.[174]

Nixon seemed unfazed by the terminology and wrote to Heath a little later expressing his hope for a 'further strengthening the natural relationship'.[175] In contrast, Kissinger was

[170] Freeman to Armstrong, 8 October 1970, and Kissinger to Heath, 10 October 1970, PREM15/714; Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo-American Relations', pp.640-641.

[171] Nixon and Heath statements, 17 December 1970, *PPPUS.*

[172] Dickie, *Special No More,* p.144.

[173] Nixon and Heath statements, 17 December 1970, *PPPUS*

[174] Ibid.

[175] Nixon to Heath, 22 January 1971, in Edward Heath, *The Course of My Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998), p.472.

irritated. The 'special relationship' was evidently 'an obstacle to the British vocation in Europe', he complained.[176] The Washington visit had come at a delicate point in the entry negotiations. A year earlier, the FCO Planning Staff had warned that for many Europeans the UK's closeness to the US remained a 'Trojan horse' (to let Britain enter the community would be to let the Americans in by default).[177] Heath understood this and was ready - as Kissinger had not failed to notice - to 'underscore the special relationship, but delicately so not to stimulate French fears, which could provoke a third veto of EEC membership'.[178]

Although the EEC took up a lot of time in the Nixon-Heath talks Vietnam also featured. Despite his election promise of "peace with honor", Nixon no longer seemed to mind how the war was terminated. 'We are hastening the end of the war and since we are ending it anyway, it doesn't make any difference to us whether it comes about unilaterally or through negotiations,' he told Heath. 'The only incentive we have left for negotiations is the prisoners.' Nixon was equally frank in replying to Heath's question: 'Will you be prepared to see Cambodia go down the drain?':

> The President said, "In effect, yes." The Prime Minister asked, "Is there a domino theory?" The President then said, "If the United States leaves Vietnam in a way that the U.S. interprets as a failure, we will then have to get out of Asia. The Japanese are then going to switch and confidence in us will erode. This is why we will see it through. If there should be any change in our views, we will warn Britain ahead of time, and we will also warn Britain of any major actions we will take".[179]

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[176] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.933.

[177] Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo-American Relations', p.642; FCO Planning Staff memorandum, 17 January 1969, FCO32/376.

[178] Spelling, ibid, p.641.

[179] Nixon-Wilson talks, 18 December 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 41, doc. 335.

This was hardly a vote of confidence in the peace process. Heath, however, instead of taking the President to task, as befitted the heir of Geneva 1954, remained silent.[180] On his return to London, Heath told the Cabinet that the Nixon administration was 'strongly in favour' of European integration, and of UK EEC entry. On Vietnam, Heath merely noted the 'considerable optimism' of US policymakers about Vietnamization.[181]

In the space of a few months, Anglo-American relations appeared to have undergone an improvement under the Conservatives. The *New York Daily News* declared that the Prime Minister's visit was 'the first time since the Eisenhower Administration that genuine personal friendliness has been enjoyed by the political leaders of the two nations'.[182]

As for the Indochinese situation as 1970 came to a close, despite the US misadventure in Cambodia, Nixon still hoped to fulfil his electoral pledge to end the war by the time he was due for re-election. By the same token failure to deliver on his 1968 "promise" could risk his chances of a second term.[183] Doubts remained about the quality of the ARVN. After two years of US investment, Vietnamization had transformed the ARVN into one of the largest and best-equipped militaries in the world but armies fight on battlefields not paper. Plagued by 'corruption, desertion, and poor leadership', any success the ARVN had so far achieved was attributable to Hanoi's deliberate decision to go on the defensive in South Vietnam in the aftermath of the Tet disaster of 1968 and await US withdrawals.[184] There were some signs of progress. With the communists on the defensive, pacification made some forward strides,

[180] Heath, *Course of My Life*, p.473.

[181] CM(70)48, CAB128/47, 22 December 1970.

[182] Heath, *Course of My Life*, p.473.

[183] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.93.

[184] Robert Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), pp.84-85; Mark Lawrence, *Vietnam: A Concise International History* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp.148-149.

particularly in the Mekong delta. Yet pacification often relied on 'torture, assassination, and forced relocation', methods not best designed to achieve the US-RVN desire to 'expand and improve' security while winning 'the support and allegiance' of increasing numbers of the local population. Indeed, the FCO suspected that pacification created rural resentment and thus made a recruitment reservoir for the communists.[185]

In public, the Nixon administration remained positive and entered 1971 insisting that Vietnamization was on track. On 6 January, the US Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, declared that progress was 'ahead of schedule', the ARVN was poised to 'take over the military burdens', and the primary combat role of US ground forces all but over.[186] Laird said much the same to the UK Embassy during a visit to Saigon. The situation was 'heartening' and he was 'much encouraged'.[187] In London, in contrast, the FCO was dubious about the prospects for Vietnamisation and feared that the largely conscript ARVN would never be a match for the highly-motivated, well-armed, skilful and conviction-driven troops of the North Vietnamese army.[188]

British misgiving were echoed by Richard Teare, a member of the National Security Council Working Group (NSCWG) on Vietnam, who was much franker than Laird in talking to British Embassy officials in Washington. Teare confided that while South Vietnamese morale had improved lately he had 'no idea' what would happen when there was 'no longer enough US technicians to keep the air conditioning going in the [ARVN] generals' trailers'. He was not being facetious. South Vietnamese reliance on the US for air-conditioning was emblematic of South Vietnamese reliance on the Americans in all other ways especially

[185] Middleton to Burgess, 26 January 1971, FCO15/1482.

[186] FCO record of Laird press conference, 6 January 1971, ibid.

[187] Saigon Embassy telegram 3 to FCO, 18 January 1971, and Washington Embassy telegram 266 to FCO, 22 January 1971, ibid.

[188] Gordon to Tomlinson, 8 January 1971, ibid.

militarily. The rate of US troop withdrawals in 1971 had to be carefully weighed, Teare further confided. Obviously the sooner the "boys" were home the more content US public opinion would become. But too hasty a retreat and the RVN might collapse as soon as the last US solider departed. Teare indicated that the administration's undisclosed objective was to see troop levels fall below 100,000 by the time of the November 1972 US election. An increased rate of withdrawal was reportedly on the cards to aid Nixon's re-election but 'important voices' within the administration had strong reservations.[189]

One of those voices was Kissinger's. In his memoirs, Kissinger explained that the rate of the ground force draw-down worried him. '[S]udden withdrawal, even if it did not wreck the South Vietnamese government and the prospects of Vietnamization, would convey…a sense of impatience to Hanoi'. If the DRV was given any indication that the US were looking to cut and run, there would be no hope of getting North Vietnam to negotiate seriously in the Paris peace process, the latter being one of the administration's routes to "peace with honor". On the contrary, it would strengthen Hanoi's resolve to wait out the American withdrawal, with air and naval power presumed to follow ground forces back to the US, before seeking full military victory.[190]

On the subject of the peace talks, Teare questioned the sincerity of Nixon's October 1970 five-point proposal.[191] In later years, Kissinger admitted that the initiative had a dual purpose: to 'get the negotiations off dead center' and get the administration's 'critics off the front pages'.[192] According to Teare, it was the latter aim that was paramount. No-one in the administration expected a positive response from Hanoi, nor was there one, but Nixon gained

[189] Boyd to Burgess, 12 January 1971, and Burgess to Boyd, 19 January 1971, ibid.

[190] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.985.

[191] Boyd to Burgess, 12 January 1971, FCO15/1482.

[192] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.980.

good PR.[193] Similarly, William Safire described Nixon's five-point programme as 'grandstanding' and 'showboating' for domestic political gain by appearing to show Congress and the media that he was committed to the peace process.[194]

The FCO valued the candid insights Teare provided. Although in general terms Anglo-American relations had improved over the previous year, the FCO was worried about the quality of the Vietnam-related information it was receiving from the State Department. In this connection, Teare's account differed – and indeed contradicted – insights previously shared with the British by officials at the State Department, and his assessment of Vietnamization was markedly less optimistic. And where the State Department insisted that Nixon's five-points were a 'serious invitation' to Hanoi to get negotiations going, Teare maintained that Nixon was just playing a domestic political game.[195]

The Heath government knew that Nixon and Kissinger were the makers of the key features of US foreign policy with the State Department marginalised. In autumn 1970, the Cabinet bemoaned the 'confused relationship' between the White House and State Department. 'Though both the President and Secretary of State appeared willing and anxious to maintain close and friendly relations with us, the latter was often not consulted'. Indeed, Douglas-Home observed, there had been times recently when 'the White House had asked us…not to inform the State Department of discussions we had had with them'.[196]

The British Embassy in Washington did its best to foster close relations with Kissinger and his staff but was handicapped by the fact that the State Department was its default source of day-to-day information on Vietnam. The FCO thus found itself in an 'uncomfortable'

[193] Boyd to Burgess, 12 January 1971, FCO15/1482.

[194] Cited in Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam*, p.235.

[195] Burgess to Boyd, 19 January 1971, FCO15/1482; Washington telegram 2964 to FCO, 7 October 1970, FCO15/1341.

[196] Notes on Cabinet discussion of Nixon visit, 30 September 1970, PREM15/714.

position; it wished to maintain good relations with the State Department but Kissinger's empire-building made it a dubious provider of information; by the same token, maintaining close relations with the White House depended on hiding from the State Department the existence (never mind the substance) of the UK Embassy's backchannel conversations with Kissinger.[197]

For the British, the mechanics of US foreign policy-making in general and decision-making on Vietnam in particular was an ongoing source of concern. The partnership between the President and his National Security Advisor was recognised as the key factor – in fact some historians have coined the term 'Nixingerism' to reflect their shared outlook.[198] At the time, however, Freeman felt that Nixon was 'too intimate' with Kissinger and 'too personally dependent upon him for the good of the system'. Kissinger's personality created further problems. 'He is naturally a bad administrator and his vanity is nourished by the presidential intimacy', Freeman informed the FCO. 'The result is apt to be undue delay, followed by unnecessary haste'.[199] The accuracy of this assessment would soon be shown.

[197] Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo-American Relations', p.653.

[198] John Young and John Kent, *International Relations since 1945: A Global History* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p.294.

[199] Freeman to Greenhill, 28 October 1970, PREM15/2231.

CHAPTER THREE

UK-US Relations, the Vietnam peace process and the Laotian crisis, 1971-1972

In Indochina, the most significant event of 1971 took place not in Vietnam or Cambodia but Laos. In February the ARVN mounted an operation codenamed Lam Son 719 which involved entering Laos to disrupt North Vietnamese supply lines. Because of Congressional restrictions on Nixon's ability to commit US troops beyond Vietnam (the legacy of the Cambodian episode) the 16,000-strong ARVN force was not accompanied by American ground forces. Lam Son 719 was also connected to the stagnant Paris peace process. 'The diplomacy of Vietnam', Karnow explains, 'had see-sawed…since the start of the struggle' with 'neither side willing to deal from weakness and hoping to secure a stronger battlefield position to improve its bargaining posture. In effect, with the Paris talks stalled, serious negotiation was only likely if one side gained a battlefield advantage. This was how Lam Son 719 linked to the Paris negotiations. Importantly, it was also the first combat test of Vietnamization. If the peace negotiations continued to go nowhere, Vietnamization still offered the United States an exit option – provided, that was, the ARVN could be relied upon to defend South Vietnam after a US withdrawal.[200]

For Nixon, doing something in Laos was also a personal political necessity. As his thoughts turned to re-election, Nixon grew concerned about the still high costs of the war and the negative consequences this might have as he launched his bid for a second term. 'By the end of 1970', Kissinger recalled, 'we ran the risk that our Vietnam strategy would turn into a

[200] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.644.

debate about the rate of our unilateral withdrawal'.[201] To placate US opinion, troop withdrawals had to continue with the aim of effectively ending the US ground role by 1972. Given the scale of North Vietnamese activity in Laos, however, Nixon and Kissinger worried about a major communist offensive in 1972 launched from Laos and designed to cause maximum public disquiet in America in the run-up to the US election. Most Americans wanted to bring the troops home but if this was followed by the quick loss of South Vietnam, all the previous sacrifices would be rendered pointless. Nixon might win votes for terminating the US ground troop commitment, but could lose others by losing South Vietnam.[202]

There were no guarantees that Thieu's government would survive following the departure of American ground forces and fewer once US air power was withdrawn. In fact, by 1971, Nixon and Kissinger, accepting this reality, seem to hoped that if South Vietnam was able to hold together for a sufficiently decent period of time after a US exit, the RVN's ultimate defeat when it came could be laid at Saigon's door not Washington's. This is the so-called "decent interval" thesis, first advanced by ex-CIA operative Frank Snepp and subsequently taken up by historians.[203]

Broadly speaking, Kissinger felt that the US had two options by this point: either strengthen the defensive capability of the South Vietnamese or pre-emptively disrupt the offensive preparations of the North Vietnamese beginning with Laos. The 'obvious solution', he suggested, was to keep an American combat division in South Vietnam throughout 1972 as a 'shield'. This would permit the acceleration of the pacification programme and free additional ARVN units for front-line operations. However, the US public's desire to see an end to the

[201] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.241; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.984.

[202] Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, p.644; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.986.

[203] Frank Snepp, *Decent Interval* (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press, 2002 edition), especially pp.311-17; David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), p.148; Wright Smith, 'Decent Interval?', *Harvard Political Review online*, 15 June 2014.

American combat role made this solution politically unviable for Nixon.[204] As the President put it to Kissinger in a 'cold-blooded' statement of "decent interval", 'if a year or two years from now North Vietnam gobbles up South Vietnam, we can have a viable foreign policy if it looks as if it's the result of South Vietnamese incompetence'.[205]

In December 1970, US strategists decided on a 'bold and imaginative thrust into the enemy's logistic nerve centre' in Laos that would 'disrupt the communist logistics effort…and enhance Hanoi's incentive to negotiate'.[206] This was the origin of Lam Son 719. The operation was planned to last ninety days but due to the Congressional backlash following the Cambodian incursion the ARVN would have no US ground support only air support.[207]

In London, the first indication the government received that something major was brewing was when William Rogers, the US Secretary of State, told a news conference in Washington on 27 January of his objections to the North Vietnamese presence in Laos. 'There are large supplies being built up in that area - in the Panhandle area of Laos. We have been using air power to attack those supplies…Whether we will take other action or not we will have to wait and see.'[208]

In the FCO, it was clear that a military move was in the offing. However, Foreign Secretary Douglas-Home predicted considerable embarrassment for the government if something explosive occurred and he had to tell parliament he had been kept wholly in the dark by the Americans. 'If there is South Vietnamese action with American air support into Southern Laos we shall be under immediate pressure to make some comment here', he cabled Freeman

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[204] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.989.

[205] Nixon to Kissinger, n.d., August 1972, in Edward Miller, ed., *The Vietnam War: A Documentary Reader* (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), p.214.

[206] Thieu-Bunker-Haig meeting, 17 December 1970, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 7, doc. 91.

[207] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.241; Haig memorandum, 27 January 1971, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 7, Vietnam (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2010), doc. 112.

[208] Washington Embassy telegram 362 to FCO, 31 January 1971, FCO15/1422; *Times*, 1 February 1971.

in Washington. 'Please point out to the Americans that in their own interests as well as ours, it would be helpful to have some indication of what may be afoot and the thinking behind it.'[209] Attempts by Freeman to get information out of the State Department, however, drew a blank.[210]

Adding to FCO unease was the fact that Souvanna Phouma, the Laotian Prime Minister, did not appear to have been brought into US confidence. According to Douglas-Home, Souvanna was 'very concerned' about mounting reports of military action and intended to issue a 'strong condemnatory statement' it his country's territorial integrity was violated. That would be an embarrassment to the UK (which had a 'special responsibility' to Laos due to its position as co-chairman of the 1962 Geneva conference on Laos, not to mention its 1954 predecessor).[211]

The Heath government thus found itself in a tricky situation. If rumours of a joint US-ARVN operation conducted without the permission of the Vientiane government proved to be well founded, it would be an outrageous violation of Laotian neutrality. Because of the Geneva conferences of 1954 and 1962, the UK was morally charged with protecting Laotian neutrality and the government was bound to come under parliamentary pressure to issue a statement denouncing US and South Vietnamese actions. If a statement was issued, it could trigger a crisis in Anglo-American relations.[212]

On 8 February came confirmation of what most Indochina observers suspected. 'Today…I have ordered the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam to attack the communist North Vietnamese bases on the Laotian territory along the Vietnam-Laos border', South Vietnam's President Thieu announced. 'This is an operation limited in time as well as in space, with the

[209] FCO telegram 302 to Washington Embassy, 2 February 1971, FCO15/1422.

[210] Washington Embassy telegram 379 to FCO, 2 February 1971, ibid.

[211] Ibid; CM(71)8, 4 February 1971, CAB128/49.

[212] FCO background paper on Laos, 8 February 1971, FCO15/1422.

clear and unique objective of disrupting the supply and infiltration network of the communist North Vietnamese troops lying in the Laotian territory.[213]

The Americans belatedly informed the British the day before of what was about to occur. Briefing Lord Cromer, Freeman's successor as Ambassador in Washington, the State Department stressed that US 'assistance' to the ARVN would be limited to 'air support and artillery fire from inside South Vietnam'. There would be no US ground combat forces deployed. In the 'context of Vietnamization', Lam Son 719 was a combat test of the ARVN and, by extension, the Nixon administration's flagship policy.[214] This was not consultation as the British wanted. At best it was a courtesy. When Cromer presented his credentials to Nixon on the day the invasion was launched, he could only wish the President well in America's latest Indochinese adventure. Nixon, in turn, described Lam Son 719 as a 'really a big show' that would be 'a real test' for the ARVN and Vietnamization.[215]

Following Thieu's announcement, Souvanna issued a public statement on behalf of the Laotian government. His reaction was milder than the FCO anticipated. Souvanna pinned 'prime responsibility' for what was happening on the North Vietnamese for 'spurning…the neutrality and territorial integrity' of Laos in the first place'.[216] A few days earlier, Souvanna admitted to British diplomats in Vientiane that the Panhandle area was no longer under his government's control.[217] In his public statement, however, while denouncing the DRV's interference, Souvanna took a strictly neutralist view and demanded that 'all foreign troops' withdraw. He also called on those powers that presided over the 1962 Geneva agreement on

[213] Saigon Embassy telegram 73 to FCO, 8 February 1971, ibid.

[214] Washington Embassy telegram 457 to FCO, 7 February 1971, ibid.

[215] Nixon-Cromer meeting, 8 February 1971, *FRUS 1969-76* online, Vol. 41, doc. 337.

[216] Washington Embassy telegram 475 to FCO, 8 February 1971, FCO15/1422.

[217] Vientiane Embassy telegram 38 to FCO, 4 February 1971, ibid.

Laos – among them Britain – to take all 'necessary measures' to protect his country's neutrality.[218]

The UK position was further complicated by its status as Geneva 1954 co-chair. On the one hand, the British were obliged to respect the wishes of the Laotian government; on the other hand, Souvanna seemed to want the UK to press the US to call off the operation, a request which would neither be well-received in nor make an impact on Washington. Anglo-American relations had undergone something of a revival under the Conservatives and the government was reluctant to take actions which risked arresting this progress. Further problems were posed by the Geneva 1962 agreement which committed Britain to uphold Laotian neutrality at the same times as it was committed by the 1954 Geneva settlement to a peaceful solution to the war in Vietnam – indeed the UK subscribed to the US policy of Vietnamization precisely because it meant de-Americanizing the conflict and bringing South Vietnam closer to the neutralized status mapped out by the 1954 accords. In view of the stated goals of Lam Son 719, namely to protect Vietnamization and the American withdrawal time-table, should the UK support the operation despite Souvanna's appeal?

The obvious first move was to ask the Vientiane government for clarification of its position. From this, it emerged that Souvanna's greatest concern was China. Maintaining the appearance of Laotian neutrality was of the utmost importance. If the Vientiane government publicly sanctioned the South Vietnamese invasion this would make it US-RVN 'accomplices', destroy any pretence of neutrality, and possibly invite PRC military intervention. It was necessary therefore for the Vientiane government to publicly condemn Lam Son 719 and demand the withdrawal of the invasion forces. In private, however, the Laotian authorities were more willing to accept what was happening and pleased at the prospect of the North Vietnamese being given a bloody-nose. As long as the campaign was 'short, sharp and sweet and produced

[218] Vientiane Embassy telegram 48 to FCO, 8 February 1971, ibid.

the desired results', the Laotian Foreign Minister told the British Ambassador in Vientiane, 'then all might be well'.[219]

On the back of this assurance, the Heath government felt able to take a firmer line in public in support of the RVN action. On 9 February, the FCO issued a statement describing the move into Laos as 'fully understandable' in view of the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the country.[220] This, however, brought forth criticism from the USSR: *Tass* accused the British of 'prostituting their co-chairman role by supporting the US' while *Izvestia* called Heath the 'defender of bloody American plundering'.[221]

Was there any justification behind the Soviet charge that the UK was not living up to its peacekeeping role? Preserving good UK-US relations was unquestionably high on the Heath government's agenda. In another public comment, Douglas-Home emphasised that Lam Son 719 was necessary to preserve Laotian independence in the long-term and protect Vietnamization and US disengagement in the short-term, a statement that earned him the personal thanks of the US Secretary of State.[222] The UK approach also pleased the Laotians. According to the British Embassy in Vientiane, Souvanna admitted privately that the neutrality of Laos had long since been 'blown' by the DRV and he personally 'appreciated the feeling behind HMG's statement'.[223]

In London, the government dismissed Soviet jibes. Moreover, as the FCO Deputy Under-Secretary for Asia pointed out, the UK took its Geneva responsibilities 'very seriously'. The same could not be said for the Soviets who were not only supplying North Vietnam with

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[219] Vientiane Embassy telegram 49 to FCO, 8 February 1971, ibid; Cabinet brief, 16 February 1971, FCO15/1423.

[220] FCO telegram 42 to Saigon Embassy, 8 February 1971, and FCO statement on Laos, 8 February 1971, FCO15/1422; *Times*, 9 February 1971.

[221] *Tass* statement, 10 February 1971, *FRUS 1969-76* , Vol. 7, doc. 126; *Izvestia* comment in Moscow Embassy telegram 191 to FCO, 10 February 1971, FCO15/1422.

[222] Douglas-Home statement, 18 February 1971, and Annenberg to Douglas-Home, 12 February 1971, FCO15/1423.

[223] Vientiane Embassy telegram 51 to FCO, 11 February 1971, FCO15/1422.

'large quantities' of arms but showed no interest in the reconvening of the Geneva conference in order to get back to the principle of internationally-recognised neutrality for Laos.[224]

In Laos, meanwhile, Lam Son 719, proceeded in confusion.[225] Monitoring events, the FCO was initially optimistic about ARVN prospects. Eight days into the operation, Douglas-Home informed the Cabinet that the South Vietnamese would probably have 'little difficulty' in destroying enemy arms dumps and disrupting DRV supply lines.[226] Unknown to the British, the ARVN was beginning to struggle. On 12 February, Thieu, fearing the cost to his best units, ordered his commanders to proceed with extreme caution.[227] This order was issued at a time when the ARVN faced only light resistance. But then, in mid-month, main-force North Vietnamese units, supported by tanks and heavy artillery, joined the fight. US intelligence had failed to pick up the presence in the Panhandle area of these battle-hardened troops.[228] From a North Vietnamese perspective, it was important to protect their position in Laos and use the opportunity to smash the South Vietnamese.[229]

Publicly, Nixon maintained an air of confidence. 'The South Vietnamese have run into very heavy resistance,' he told a news conference on 17 February. 'We expected that.'[230] As fighting intensified, Cromer, after sounding out US officials, cabled the FCO on 26 February to say that far from the 'pushover' that some in Washington had anticipated, the operation was shaping into a potential disaster. This would not only dent US confidence in Vietnamization

[224] Cabinet brief, 16 February 1971, FCO15/1422; FCO telegrams 161 and 162 to Moscow Embassy, 12 February 1971, FCO15/1422.

[225] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.645.

[226] CM(10)71, 16 February 1971, CAB128/49.

[227] Kissinger, *White House Years*, p.1004.

[228] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.245.

[229] J. H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Stations: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), p.65.

[230] Nixon news conference, 17 February 1971, *PPPUS*.

but could impose strain on Anglo-American relations if the United States reacted by re-opening the air war against North Vietnam. 'If the South Vietnamese suffer a severe mauling we may have to expect an agonising reappraisal of US policy on Vietnam', Cromer warned.[231]

In London, FCO officials concluded that a 'some sort of draw' was now the best if not the optimum outcome. From an American viewpoint, 'such an outcome would be good enough to let the President's policy of Vietnamization and American troop withdrawals continue but would make it clear…that a military solution in Indo-China is really not practicable'. In essence, the FCO hoped that if both sides suffered military losses they would both reject thoughts of battlefield victory and make a genuine effort to make the Paris peace process succeed.[232]

By early March, even a draw seemed optimistic as the ARVN in Laos began to disintegrate. 'The Communist counter attacks…have shown that they will fight hard to prevent the complete cutting of the Ho Chi Minh trail', Douglas-Home told the Cabinet on 4 March. 'Casualties have been heavy'.[233] Unknown to the British, at the end of February Thieu had scaled back his ambition; his aim now was to score a purely symbolic rather tangible success by capturing the town of Tchepone, holding it for a time, and then withdraw.[234]

By mid-March, the US government was privately anxious but still publicly positive. On 14 March, Nixon told reporters that the ARVN had 'come of age' and had fought hard. '[W]hat has already been accomplished in Laos at this time has insured even more the plan for withdrawal of American troops…the disruption of the supply lines of the enemy through Laos…has very seriously damaged the enemy's ability to wage effective action against our

[231] Cromer to Greenhill, 26 February 1971, FCO15/1424.

[232] Gordon to Tomlinson, 1 March 1971, ibid.

[233] Cabinet brief, 4 March 1971, ibid.

[234] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.245.

remaining forces in Vietnam'.[235] In reality, the ARVN had proven to be no match for the North Vietnamese.[236] From Saigon, Alexander Haig, Kissinger's deputy, reported on 19 March that ARVN commanders, backed by Thieu, were determined to call off the operation and undertake an 'orderly and tactically sound' retreat.[237] What in fact occurred was chaos. In the event, US helicopters had to be sent into Laos en masse to rescue the ARVN from total annihilation.

The historiographical consensus is that Lam Son 719 was not only a 'first rate disaster' for the ARVN, exposing 'grave deficiencies in planning, organisation, leadership, motivation and operational expertise', but a defeat for Vietnamization.[238] At the time, in contrast, Nixon was defiant. In April, he declared that the South Vietnamese had 'demonstrated that without American advisers they could fight effectively against the very best troops North Vietnam could put in the field…Vietnamization has succeeded.' Because of the 'achievements of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos' Nixon planned to withdraw 100,000 more US troops by December to bring the total withdrawals since he took office to 365,000.[239]

Hindsight suggests that Nixon was already privately committed to the "decent interval" strategy. An objective assessment of Lam Son 719 showed that the ARVN could not fight effectively without American advisors – the opposite of Nixon's publicly-stated conclusion – but might, with more aid and training, hold the line long enough after full US disengagement for the eventual (indeed the certain) North Vietnamese victory to be seen by the world as a

[235] Nixon news conference, 14 March 1971, *PPPUS.*

[236] Saigon Embassy telegram 154 to FCO, 22 March 1971, FCO15/1424.

[237] Haig to Kissinger, 19 March 1971, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 7, doc. 158.

[238] Michael Maclear, *Vietnam: the Ten Thousand Day War* (London: Methuen, 1981), p.300; Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost* War (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p.197; similarly, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: the United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p.197; William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), p.238; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p.253.

[239] Nixon television address, 7 April 1971, *PPPUS.*

South Vietnamese not an American defeat.[240] In London, the FCO seemed equally deluded as to the conclusions to be drawn from Lam Son 719. According to the Head of the Southeast Asia Department, the ARVN had passed its test with the operation demonstrating the 'continued success' of Vietnamization.[241] In Washington, Cromer was very sceptical. Nixon's defence of Lam Son 719 was not amongst his 'most convincing performances'. In terms of Vietnamization, the Ambassador noted how the President made no mention of the critical role of US air support which had inflicted most of the North Vietnamese casualties Nixon referred to and helped ensure that the ARVN retreat was not even more costly.[242] Nor was Nixon's political opponents satisfied. Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, JFK's brother, called the Laos decision a 'nightmare', while Senator J. William Fulbright, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, called Lam Son 719 a 'massive deception or a massive misjudgement, or both'.[243]

In private, US policymakers were seriously worried. Vietnamization was not working. Or rather it would need a lot more time and American investment if the South Vietnamese were to get close to being able to defend themselves once all US forces had departed. '[W]e're not going to lose out there', Nixon insisted to Kissinger in the aftermath. 'I determined that long ago. We wouldn't have gone into Cambodia; we wouldn't have gone into Laos, if we had not made that determination'.[244]

But not losing was not the same as winning. Victory was no longer on Nixon's agenda. Nor had it been at any point given the legacy bequeathed by Johnson, namely a peace process

[240] Geoffrey Warner, 'Leaving Vietnam: Nixon, Kissinger and Ford, 1969–1975: Part one, January 1969-January 1972', *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 6 (2011), pp.1485-1506.

[241] Gordon to Tomlinson, 8 April 1971, FCO15/1492.

[242] Washington Embassy telegram 1247 to FCO, 9 April 1971, FCO15/1492; Hess, *Explaining America's Lost War*, p.197.

[243] Maclear, *Vietnam*, p.301.

[244] Nixon, April 1971, in Dou**g**las Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, *The Nixon Tapes 1971-1972* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), p.383.

and an end to the bombing of North Vietnam. Now, as he looked towards his re-election campaign, peace with honour remained Nixon's goal. This would not be defeat, which it was his top priority to avoid, but it would provide the ultimate exit option. If Lam Son 719 did anything it encouraged the Nixon administration to take the Paris peace process more seriously.[245]

Nixon later remembered the first months of 1971 as 'the lowest point of my first term as President', a period when the 'problems we confronted were so overwhelming and so apparently impervious to anything we could do to change them that it seemed possible that I might not even be nominated for re-election.'[246]

Among these problems was a new wave of US domestic discontent connected to the Vietnam war and the Laotian fiasco and matched in Congress which voted to cease US involvement in the war by the end of 1972.[247] In June, Colonel Robert Heinl wrote a damning article for the *Armed Forces Journal* on the disintegration of US armed forces in Vietnam. '[O]ur army that now remains in Vietnam is in a state approaching collapse' he argued, 'with individual units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers and noncommissioned officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited where not near mutinous'. Desertion rates were 'startlingly high'.[248] According to historian Marilyn Young the headline message of the Heinl thesis was that the 'ARVN had better fight their war because the US Army would have difficulty doing it for very much longer'.[249]

[245] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.93.

[246] Nixon, *Memoirs*, p.497.

[247] Maclear, *Vietnam*, p.301; Lawrence, *Vietnam War*, p.149.

[248] Robert Heinl, 'The Collapse of the Armed Forces', *Armed Forces Journal*, 7 June 1971.

[249] Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p.256.

Also in mid-1971, the *New York Times* began publishing the *Pentagon Papers*, a supposedly top secret Defence Department study on how the United States ended up in Vietnam. The study was leaked by a Pentagon official, Daniel Ellsberg, who became disillusioned over the extent of official lying about Vietnam in the Kennedy and Johnson years.[250] The *Pentagon Papers* had an unexpected UK angle. On 15 June, the *New York Times* published a telegram sent by Harold Wilson to Lyndon Johnson in June 1965 in which Wilson warned that his government might have to disassociate itself from the US bombing of North Vietnam unless the Americans showed willing to get peace talks going. LBJ gave Wilson an assurance, but as the London *Times* pointed out, Wilson had been duped because the *Pentagon Papers* showed that 'negotiations…were far from Mr Johnson's mind'.[251]

The leak did not embarrass Heath directly, only his predecessor, but at a wider level the FCO was worried by the scale of the breach of security in Washington and concerned about the future confidentiality of UK-US diplomatic interactions.[252] Nixon, for his part, was enraged by the 'violation of top secret classifications' which posed a danger to national security and did harm to US relations with allies like Britain. Consequently, his administration went to court to try an block further publication of leaked material.[253] In London, the Heath government saw the *Pentagon Papers* as an opportunity to support Nixon in ways that could help Anglo-American relations. Ignoring the issue of press freedom, Douglas-Home determined to back any action taken by the US administration in 'supressing further revelations'.[254] Kissinger was grateful for the support, while Lord Cromer, with an eye on the "special relationship", told the

[250] Melvin Small, 'Will the Real Daniel Ellsberg Please Stand Up', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (2003), pp.757-761.

[251] *Times*, 16 June 1971.

[252] FCO telegram 1705 to Washington Embassy, 19 June 1971, PREM15/651.

[253] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, pp.253-258.

[254] FCO telegram 1705 to Washington Embassy, 19 June 1971, PREM15/651.

FCO that there was 'much to be said for continuing to help the Americans over this'.[255] Publicly, the Heath government expressed concern about 'unauthorised publication of confidential exchanges' and insisted that confidentiality was essential 'in the interest of good relations' between governments.[256]

As it happened, the Nixon administration was defeated in the Supreme Court in a landmark victory for press freedom and the *New York Times* was permitted to continue serialization. The saga of the *Pentagon Papers* added to the agitated political atmosphere in America over the trial of Lieutenant William Calley for his part in the massacre of civilians at My Lai in 1968. According to one opinion poll, 58 percent of Americans believed US involvement in Vietnam was not just wrong but morally wrong, and an even higher percentage simply wanted to be rid of the Vietnam commitment as soon as possible.[257]

When the new fighting season began in Vietnam in the autumn following the six-month monsoon, UK policy remained as it had been for some time. The Heath government supported US efforts to contain communism in Indochina and Southeast Asia generally but it was also committed to a peaceful resolution both from conviction and from the legacy of Geneva 1954, and welcomed the US military draw-down and Vietnamization as positive aids towards this goal. However, at the wider level of Anglo-American relations, UK support for Nixon's Vietnam policy, and for his handling of the *Pentagon Papers*, did not prevent tensions in other areas including Cold War diplomacy. In July came the momentous announcement that Nixon planned to visit communist China in February 1972. The move – described as the US 'opening' of China – marked a massive shift in American Cold War policy and was designed, in hindsight,

[255] Washington Embassy telegram 2118 to FCO, 21 June 1971, ibid.

[256] Douglas-Home to Heath, 22 June 1971, ibid.

[257] Lawrence, *Vietnam War*, pp.149-151; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for War: the United States and Vietnam 1941-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.290-292.

to exploit Sino-Soviet rivalry by playing the Chinese off against the Soviets. At the time, Nixon insisted that his reaching out to China would not be at the 'expense' of America's 'old friends'.[258] Even so one of those old friends, Britain, experienced what Andrew Scott calls 'acute upset' at the lack of consultation on such a potentially Cold War game-changing initiative.[259]

On the face of it the evolution in US policy towards China ought to have been welcomed by the British. As the *Times* pointed, Nixon's 'stunning, diplomatic coup' might encourage the North Vietnamese to take the peace process more seriously if the PRC, in return for improved relations with the US, was to press its ally to compromise.[260] The Heath Cabinet was in fact aware of this potential benefit but was still upset at the absence of any advance warning of what the Americans planned. In consequence, Nixon's 'sudden action…undermined confidence in the US'.[261]

The announcement of Nixon's PRC trip was followed by another 'shock' to the UK when the US administration imposed a 10 percent import surcharge and suspended dollar convertibility in an attempt to ease America's economic troubles.[262] Nixon's fait accompli threatened to solve some of America's economic difficulties by causing economic problems for the UK and left the Heath government more inclined than ever to draw closer to Western Europe.[263] Ironically, while the British complained about the lack of US consultation on the opening of China, Kissinger was complaining about a lack of information from the UK on its

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[258] Nixon announcement, *PPPUS*, 15 July 1971; Anthony Kubek, 'The "Opening'" of China: President Nixon's 1972 Journey', *American Asian Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (1992), pp.1-22.

[259] Scott, *Allies Apart*, p.53.

[260] *Times*, 17 July 1971.

[261] Scott, *Allies Apart*, p.53; CM(71)40, 22 July 1971, CAB129/49.

[262] Christopher Hill and Christopher Lord, 'The Foreign Policy of the Heath Government', in Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon, eds, *The Heath Government, 1970-74: A Reappraisal* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.308.

[263] C. J. Bartlett, *The "Special Relationship": A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992), p.130.

EEC approach. If the UK was now prioritising EEC relations, Kissinger felt, it was maybe time to 'cut them off from intelligence special information they are getting here…If they are going to share everything with the Europeans we can't trust them for the special relationship'.[264]

By the autumn, Anglo-American relations were still tense. Nixon, however, seems to have sensed danger in this discord and decided (to Kissinger's dismay) to send 'warm personal regards' to Heath following the UK government's success in passing its EEC-entry legislation through parliament. The message was received with 'great pleasure' by Heath.[265]

As far as Vietnam was concerned, the cooling of Kissinger towards the UK was a concern for the FCO which had come to rely on the US National Security chief for information on the war and the peace process.[266] Against this background, both generally and specifically on Vietnam, Heath prepared to meet Nixon for a two-day conference at Bermuda. A FCO brief for Heath concluded that UK-US relations were presently in a stage of 'transition' and there was bound to some tension until a 'new' or 'different' relationship was established. Bermuda should thus be used by Heath to demonstrate that he was 'relaxed' about relations but also to obtain information on US policy, including on Vietnam.[267]

The press on both sides of the Atlantic played up Anglo-American differences. The *New York Times* felt that the Nixon-Heath talks would 'initiate long overdue repair work', while the *Manchester Guardian* hoped that the meeting, following the 'Nixon shocks' (the visit to China and the end of convertibility), would mark a 'new chapter' in relations.[268] Concerned about this press reporting, Douglas-Home instructed Cromer to tell Kissinger that the 'alleged

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[264] Hill and Lord, 'Heath Government', p.306; Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo-American Relations', pp.13-14.

[265] FCO telegram 2780 to Washington Embassy, 29 October 1971, PREM15/715.

[266] Margetson to Gordon et al, 1 November 1971, FCO15/1492.

[267] Hankey to PUS, 6 December 1971, FCO82/66; FCO paper on Anglo-American relations, n.d., December 1971, PREM15/713.

[268] Washington Embassy telegram 3992 to FCO, 29 November 1971, press digest, ibid; *Manchester Guardian*, 16 December 1971.

bad state of US–UK relations' was just that, *alleged*. As for UK entry into Europe, this was not a case of 'off with the old and on with the new' as far as the "special relationship" was concerned.[269]

Behind the scenes, the British were worried. The main problem remained the lack of consultation by the Americans, not US policies themselves.[270] Lord Cromer singled out Kissinger and his highly personalised approach to international affairs for blame.[271] The Washington Embassy had regularly reported to the FCO on Kissinger's enjoyment of power, his obsession with secrecy his determination to keep major decision-making in his own hands, but these characteristics had become greater recently. According to Cromer, the Kissinger domination meant that US allies, including Britain, were not just kept in ignorance but were sometimes 'positively misled'. However, the only thing worse than losing favour with Kissinger was having to rely on a US Secretary of State who 'probably no longer tries very hard' and a State Department in 'total eclipse'.[272] All-told the prospects going into 1972 were not promising. 'The complexity of the period we are entering demands urgent action to ensure that transatlantic relations are restored to the closeness which we are agreed is essential if we are to cope with the difficulties that lie ahead', argued the Assistant Under-Secretary for the Americas. Britain's 'first task' was to restore the 'old ease and closeness' of communication.[273]

Nixon arrived in Bermuda on 20 December. '[W]e are the fourth of four very historic meetings that have been held here', Nixon remarked. '1953, Prime Minister Churchill and President Eisenhower; 1957, President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Macmillan; 1961,

[269] Spelling, 'Heath and Anglo-American Relations', p.8.

[270] Hankey to PUS, 6 December 1971, FCO82/66.

[271] Cromer to Greenhill, 12 November 1971, ibid.

[272] Hankey to PUS, 6 December 1971, ibid; Washington Embassy telegram 4186, 6 December 1971, FCO82/67; Overton to Cromer, 3 January 1972, FCO82/182.

[273] Hankey to PUS, 6 December 1971, FCO82/66.

President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan; and now Prime Minister Heath and I'.[274] Over the course of two days, the leaders discussed a range of topics including Britain's relations with Europe, SALT and China. Vietnam was covered when Heath requested an update on US military withdrawals. These were going 'pretty well', Nixon confirmed, and although the enemy remained 'active' the draw-down would continue during 1972. Heath was also reassured to learn that the Americans would continue to impress on the North Vietnamese in Paris the need for a cease-fire.[275]

On the wider plane of relations Nixon found the talks with Heath 'extremely valuable'. There would always be 'tactical' disagreements amongst allies but these could be resolved by 'consultation and discussion'. Heath might have pointed out that consultation and discussion had been lacking on the US side in recent times but confined himself to agreeing that a 'heathy relationship can withstand change'. The UK and the EEC 'should maintain the closest possible links with the United States, based on the vast area of common interests which we shall continue to share'. On the face of it the Bermuda meeting brought about a realignment. To Heath, the meeting 'confirmed' the 'abiding nature of the Anglo-American relationship'. For his part, Nixon was 'reassured of the fact that that special relationship…is as strong now, and even more necessary now than ever before'.[276]

In their joint communiqué Nixon seemed content to use Heath's terminology in describing UK-US relations and committed himself publicly to greater consultation. 'In view of the significance of the *natural relationship* [emphasis added] between the United Kingdom and the United States', the two leaders 'resolved to maintain their close and continuing

[274] Heath-Nixon toasts, 20 December 1971, *PPPUS.*

[275] Bermuda talks, 20-22 December 1971, PREM15/1268.

[276] Ibid; Heath-Nixon toasts, 20 December 1971, *PPPUS.*

consultation at all levels in their approach to world problems'.[277] As so often, the US rhetorical commitment to consultation would soon fall down in practice.

[277] Heath-Nixon joint statement, 21 December 1971, *PPPUS*.

CHAPTER FOUR

UK-US relations and Nixon's search for "peace with honor", 1972-1973

As 1972 dawned, Vietnam, and a major development in US policy, soon put Nixon's commitment to US-UK consultation to the test. On 13 January, Nixon announced that a further 70,000 US troops would be out of Vietnam by 1 May, reducing the overall force level to 69,000 (down from the half-a-million he had inherited from Johnson).[278] This was followed by a televised Presidential address on 25 January in which Nixon made what he called a 'generous and far-reaching' proposal to end the war based on the withdrawal of all American forces within six months of a cease-fire, the speedy return of all prisoners of war, and appropriate arrangements for the security of the RVN.[279] Nixon had wanted to make an 'all-out speech' for some time.[280] Now he got his way and significantly used the address to reveal the existence of the top secret US-DRV (Kissinger-Le Duc Tho) talks, which had formed a hidden parallel set of negotiations to the formal public peace process, to prove his commitment to peace.[281]

The secret US-North Vietnamese talks had begun, Nixon explained, so that the two sides could 'talk frankly…free from the pressure of public debate'. But progress had been 'disappointing' and the American people now 'deserved an accounting of why it has been disappointing'. The DRV had misled the American people by publicly criticising the US administration for failing to respond to their peace proposals and the time had come, said Nixon, to set the record straight. Kissinger had in fact put forward 'good-faith counterproposals' which had gone unanswered by Hanoi. In May 1971, the US agreed to no

[278] Nixon statement, 13 January 1972, *PPPUS*.

[279] Nixon address, 25 January 1972, *PPPUS*.

[280] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.287.

[281] Nixon address, 25 January 1972, *PPPUS*.

longer seek simultaneous withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam; mutual withdrawal would be replaced by unilateral American withdrawal. The administration believed that Vietnamization would ensure the survival of South Vietnam without the need for a major US military presence, and counterbalance a continued North Vietnamese military presence in the RVN.[282]

Needless to say, Nixon gave no hint of "decent interval" thinking but it is likely that he and Kissinger hoped that a cosmetic arrangement allowing for early US disengagement would hold for a reasonable period of time, but when the inevitable communist push for reunification occurred and the RVN collapsed it would be seen as a South Vietnamese not a US defeat.[283] Whatever the truth of the matter, Kissinger considered Nixon's speech one of his 'most dramatic and impressive'.[284] In London, the FCO was taken unawares – no advance notice was given – but officials were gratified to learn of the Kissinger-Tho channel. However, they also officials suspected that in terms of timing Nixon's hand had been forced by intelligence reports of a possible communist offensive timed to coincide with Nixon's visit to China in mid-February. The US administration did not wish to appear as though its peace offer was made 'under pressure' of North Vietnamese battlefield progress.[285] London policymakers also suspected that Nixon's announcement was intended to ensure that he arrived in Beijing with a 'solid' US domestic position.[286]

In his memoirs, Kissinger confirmed the correctness of this contemporary UK assessment. America's Vietnam policy going into 1972 was a 'considerable success'. Domestic

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[282] Ibid.

[283] Brinkley and Nichter, eds., *Nixon Tapes*, pp.10-11.

[284] Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: a History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), p.230.

[285] Cabinet notes, 27th January 1972, FCO15/1719.

[286] Washington Embassy telegram 344 to FCO, 2 February 1972, FCO15/1692.

opposition had lessened, the North Vietnamese had been thrown 'off stride' by US diplomacy, and Nixon was in a 'solid' position to take 'strong action' in defence of South Vietnam if or when it came to it. 'If we could weather the Communist offensive', if it took place, Kissinger wrote, 'the President could go to Peking [Beijing]…with the hope that we could begin the construction of a new international order'.[287]

Reaction to the speech, recalled Kissinger, was 'stunned surprise both at our long record of efforts and at the sweep of our proposals'.[288] The *New York Times* wrote that Nixon's peace proposals represented a 'major advance over the administration's previous public positions' and concluded that they 'merited support from all shades of American opinion'.[289] In London, the FCO was not so impressed. 'The proposal contains very little that was not…in the…earlier public negotiating offer', officials concluded. At best, Nixon's statement was a 'comprehensive synthesis' of American and South Vietnamese negotiating positions previously presented separately.[290] Although the FCO was lukewarm, the Cabinet welcomed the statement insofar as it confirmed Nixon's commitment to a negotiated settlement. 'This statement of the American negotiating position should help to convince public opinion…that it is a reasonable and constructive [offer]', ministers concluded.[291]

The Heath government doubted that Hanoi would respond positively to US terms but it still publicly praised the Nixon plan as a 'constructive and positive' development.[292] At the same time, the UK press speculated about the amount of 'advance notice' the US government gave to its British ally about this major initiative, and whether the Kissinger-Tho channel had

[287] Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp.1044-1046.

[288] Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.230.

[289] Washington Embassy telegram 344 to FCO, 2 February 1972, FCO15/1692.

[290] FCO report, 25 January 1972, ibid.

[291] Summary of Cabinet conclusions, 27 January 1972, FCO15/1719.

[292] FCO telegram 195 to Washington Embassy, 27 January 1972, ibid.

been known to the FCO.[293] The truth of the matter is that the British had no inkling of a parallel bilateral US-DRV peace process until just a few hours before Nixon's speech when Lord Cromer was briefed by the State Department and told that a 'favourable public reception' to US peace proposals in the UK would be 'deeply appreciated'.[294] Kissinger passed Cromer the full text of the Nixon speech – but only slightly ahead of delivery.[295]

UK policymakers were disappointed by all this. At one level, they had no right to advance consultation on a matter primarily concerning the United States and North Vietnam. At another level, given worries in the FCO about US unilateralism, Nixon's Bermuda undertaking on consultation, and the apparent working assumption in Washington that the UK would automatically agree with all US initiatives, the President's speech re-opened tensions. According to the *Times,* the FCO could not hide its 'embarrassment' at having been kept 'largely in the dark about the 30 months of secret talks'. Nixon's 'technique of using Dr Kissinger for diplomatic moves that are kept secret from all but a handful of confidants is well known in allied capitals' but 'the latest disclosure is an awkward one for Mr Heath' with implications beyond Vietnam in demonstrating that Anglo-American relations generally were not as aligned as they might be.[296]

The DRV responded to Nixon's speech on 31 January. Rejecting US proposals, Hanoi published its own account of the negotiations and reissued a peace plan it first put to Kissinger in June 1971. The DRV described the differences between the US and North Vietnamese approaches as 'fundamental – like night and day'.[297] Amongst other things, Hanoi demanded

[293] FCO news digest, 26 January 1972, PREM15/1281.

[294] Washington Embassy telegram 265 to FCO, 25 January 1972, ibid.

[295] Washington Embassy telegram 257 to FCO, 25 January 1972, ibid.

[296] *Times*, 27 January 1972.

[297] Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.231.

US respect for Vietnamese unity, a total withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam while permitting those of North Vietnam to remain, a full exchange of prisoners of war (POWs), and the establishment in South Vietnam of a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord to prepare for elections in the south and ultimately reunification 'through peaceful means'.[298]

According to Kissinger, Hanoi's proposal was a 'slightly reworked' version of a previous proposal posited on the release of US POWs in return for Thieu's immediate resignation and the dismantling of the RVN police, army and pacification programme. Unsurprisingly, the US government refused to accept terms which effectively surrendered the RVN to a communist future. However, Kissinger recalled, critics in the US were quick to claim that the diplomatic stalemate was 'entirely the administration's fault' for showing too much regard for the views of the Thieu government which was increasingly seen by US opinion as fascistic, authoritarian and not an ally that America should spend any more blood defending.[299]

By the end of January 1972, the prospects of "peace with honor" did not seem good. There remained a possibility that Nixon and Kissinger's wider foreign policy initiatives – the pursuit of improved relations with the USSR and PRC – would impact positively on the Vietnam peace process. Nixon came to power convinced that the time had come for a re-evaluation of American Cold War policy. The combination of Nixon's political pragmatism and Kissinger's realpolitik duly produced a new approach based on détente.[300] In pursuit of this aim, especially a SALT deal with the USSR to limit nuclear weapons, the US government was ready to manipulate Soviet fears of China. By 1969, the USSR and PRC were close to war and Nixon and Kissinger planned to play the China "card" (seeking to create a close relationship with the Chinese) to scare the USSR into believing a US-PRC axis was forming and thus to

[298] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.87.

[299] Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, pp.230-232.

[300] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p.273.

push the USSR to seek better relations with the US as a counter. And the US price for closer relations was détente in general and SALT in particular.[301]

Nixon and Kissinger also practised linkage by connecting various problems in the Cold War. Vietnam is an example of this. By 1969, North Vietnam was reliant on military aid from China and the USSR. Soviet surface-to-air missiles, radar, and communications equipment helped with DRV defence, and Chinese rice and supplies of smaller arms, machine guns, grenades, and ammunition was also important. By the early 1970s, however, Nixon and Kissinger hoped that both the USSR and PRC, in return for improved relations with the US, would either end their aid to North Vietnam or pressurise Hanoi into giving the Americans acceptable peace terms.[302] The US strategy of détente and the concept of linkage evolved gradually but came to spectacular fruition in February 1972 when Nixon became the first US President to visit the PRC in what he called a 'week that changed the world'.[303]

The 1972 US-PRC summit helped improve bilateral relations and furthered Nixon and Kissinger's opening to China in ways that did indeed make the USSR nervous and more inclined to agree to US wishes for a SALT treaty. On Vietnam, Nixon found the Chinese sympathetic to the American desire to get out of the war with honour, but because of the Sino-Soviet dispute, Mao Zedong, the PRC leader, was reluctant to abandon the DRV in case it joined the Soviet camp and China found it had an enemy on its southern border. The PRC supported a peace settlement in principle but were not prepared to force North Vietnam to meet the US position.[304] In his recent history of Vietnam, Max Hastings shows that Nixon and Kissinger indicated to the Chinese that the US would not care very much about what happened

[301] Margaret Macmillan, 'Nixon, Kissinger and the Opening to China', in Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds, *Nixon Confronts the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp.112-114.

[302] Ilya Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 1996), pp.59-72; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp.192-203.

[303] Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp.651-652.

[304] Ibid, pp.652-653.

to South Vietnam after peace as long as the communists allowed a 'reasonable interval' (in other words a "decent interval") between US withdrawal and the final communist take-over.[305]

In London, the Heath government watched events closely and took note of the Vietnam aspects of the Nixon visit to China. From the FCO perspective, Douglas-Home told the Cabinet, peace in Vietnam probably hinged more on the US and North Vietnam coming to terms than on PRC or USSR diplomacy. Beyond this, he felt that Nixon playing Cold War peacemaker would 'probably be of considerable assistance' when he sought re-election in November 1972. Furthermore, the visit might also result in 'increasing anxiety on the part of the Government of the Soviet Union about Chinese intentions in the short term, particularly if it seemed likely that United States policy towards the People's Republic of China became less hostile.' [306]

In actual fact, in May 1972 Nixon would become the first US President to visit the USSR too when he had a summit with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in Moscow at which a SALT agreement (SALT-1) was reached, a development seen as a peak moment in détente, although the USSR, like the PRC, while supporting a Vietnam peace agreement, was not ready to put pressure on the DRV to come to terms with the US.[307]

The North Vietnamese seem to have concluded the same thing. At the end of March 1972 the DRV launched a major ("spring") offensive, invading South Vietnam with three divisions and Russian tanks and seeking to capture the northern provinces of the south in the hope that its negotiating power would be boosted by battlefield victories.[308] In Washington, Kissinger had

[305] Hastings, *Vietnam,* pp.520-521.

[306] CM(72)10, 24 February 1972, CAB128/50.

[307] Gaiduk, *Soviet Union and the Vietnam War,* pp.236-237.

[308] William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp.320-321.

been urging Nixon for some time to consider resuming the bombing of North Vietnam and events would soon play to Kissinger's advantage.[309]

In London, the Foreign Secretary described to the Cabinet 'a military operation of considerable magnitude'.[310] In all, the North Vietnamese committed 120,000 soldiers to the offensive.[311] FCO officials reflected that a major DRV move 'had been expected for some months' with the aim of demonstrating that Vietnamization had failed and thus 'increasing their own leverage in Paris'. If the US responded with 'concentrated air attacks' against North Vietnam, however, the UK, in its on-going capacity as Geneva co-chair, would be obliged to comment publicly. In any statement, the government would have to balance its continued hope for a peaceful diplomatic outcome to the war with condemnation of the DRV and backing for the US.[312] When the South Vietnamese Ambassador in London demanded a strong British condemnation of North Vietnam, Douglas-Home explained that while the UK 'deplored' the invasion it was 'difficult' for Britain 'to take any specific action' beyond words of criticism.[313]

By early April, the immediate crisis appeared to have abated, the Cabinet noted, as the South Vietnamese, backed strongly by US forces, steadily blunted the offensive.[314] At this point, however, the Nixon administration decided to consolidate the position in South Vietnam by bombing North Vietnam. Operation Linebacker, which began on 16 April, involved 700 B-52 sorties during the remainder of the month with the Hanoi-Haiphong area the main target.[315]

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[309] National Security Decision Memorandum, 17 February 1972, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 8 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), doc. 29.

[310] CM(72)20 13 April 1972, CAB128/50.

[311] Stephen P. Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Easter Offensive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 119-131.

[312] Shakespeare to Wilford, 4 April 1972, FCO15/1719; Cabinet brief, 13 April 1972, FCO15/1720.

[313] FCO telegram 89 to Saigon Embassy, 5 April 1972, FCO15/1719.

[314] CM(72)20 13 April 1972, CAB128/50.

[315] Herring, *America's Longest War,* pp.304-307.

The FCO accepted Linebacker as a 'logical development of current US policy' and consistent with US warnings of retaliation if the DRV interfered overtly in the RVN but rumours that the US Navy also planned to mine Haiphong disturbed officials as this risked 'direct confrontation' with China or the Soviet Union if their vessels were sunk.[316] In Cabinet, Douglas-Home thought that the USSR might cancel Nixon's forthcoming visit to Moscow due to the crisis.[317] Nixon himself, however, saw no reason compromise as he guessed that the USSR would still welcome him due to its fear of China. 'The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time', he said in private about the North Vietnamese.[318]

It was not long before the Heath government found itself under popular pressure in the UK to condemn the US bombing. In 1966, when the Labour government publicly expressed unease at US air attacks on the populous suburbs of Hanoi, Heath, as leader of the opposition, had been critical. It was 'illogical', he argued, for the government to 'approve general US military policy in Vietnam, but to disassociate themselves from attacks on specific targets of military significance' despite the risk of civilian casualties.[319] Now, six years later, Heath and his government showed consistency in accepting that Linebacker was justifiable in view of the provocation of North Vietnam's attack on South Vietnam.[320] The supportive UK stance certainly helped with Anglo-American relations with Kissinger personally thanking Douglas-Home for British backing.[321] In return, Kissinger became more forthcoming about US policy. The bombing was intended to damage North Vietnam's war-making capacity, he explained,

[316] Shakespeare to Wilford, 17 April 1972, FCO15/1723.

[317] CM(72)24, 4 May 1972, CAB128/50.

[318] Herring, *America's Longest War*, p.307.

[319] Shakespeare to Wilford, 17 April 1972, FCO15/1723.

[320] FCO brief, 17 April 1972, FCO15/1720.

[321] SEAD memorandum, 18 April 1972, FCO15/1692.

but would also serve the purpose of 'intimidating' the USSR which might consequently become more receptive to abandoning the DRV as the price of closer relations with the US.[322]

On 4 May, the US government extended the duration of Linebacker and the bombing would continue for the rest of the month.[323] Then, on 8 May, Nixon announced that the US Navy had now mined Haiphong harbour. Despite US attempts to negotiate constructively in Paris, the DRV 'flatly refused' to reciprocate. Accordingly, North Vietnam 'must be denied the weapons and supplies it needs to continue the aggression' in the south, hence the sealing-off Haiphong to Sino-Soviet shipping.[324] Privately, the mining reflected Nixon's determination to 'stop at nothing to bring the enemy to his knees'.[325] To the FCO, the move might yet have a beneficial impact on the war situation and could persuade the USSR into working harder to bring about a peace settlement rather than face the prospect of Vietnam escalating out of control.[326] Nixon, as we have seen, gambled that the USSR, worried about China, would not destroy the US-Soviet Moscow summit – and he gambled correctly. Even though a Soviet merchant ship was sunk at Haiphong, the USSR went ahead with the meeting. Later that May, Nixon and Brezhnev signed an Anti-Ballistic Missiles (ABM) Treaty alongside SALT-I.[327] As Douglas-Home commented in Cabinet, the USSR was evidently 'inclined to regard the war in Vietnam as a relatively minor obstacle to the development of better relations with the United States'.[328]

Two hours before Nixon went public with the decision to mine Haiphong, Heath received a message from the President explaining the decision as necessary to end 'this

[322] Washington Embassy telegram 1347 to FCO, 18 April 1972, PREM15/1281.

[323] Randolph, *Powerful and Brutal Weapons*, pp.154-163.

[324] Nixon television address, 8 May 1972, *PPPUS*.

[325] Nixon to Kissinger, 9 May 1972, *FRUS 1969-76*, Vol. 8, doc. 139.

[326] Washington Embassy telegram 1573 to FCO, 10 May 1972, FCO15/1693.

[327] Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938* (London: Penguin, 1997), pp.229-232, 245.

[328] CM(72)29, 6 June 1972, CAB128/50.

disruptive and wasteful war' and hoping that he could count on the Prime Minister's 'understanding and support'.[329] Despite the short notice, Heath replied that he was 'most grateful' for the message and offered full support, including pressing the USSR to support a negotiated settlement.[330] Despite this, the UK government walked a diplomatic tightrope. As the FCO's Southeast Asia experts noted, supporting Nixon was necessary for reasons to do with the "special relationship" but 'too strong' a level of support was incompatible with Britain's responsibility as co-chair of Geneva 1954.[331]

Privately, the UK government also questioned the legality of the mining of DRV territorial waters.[332] The FCO Legal Department counselled that the US action probably violated international law and cautioned that the government could be placed in an embarrassing position if it publicly backed Nixon's initiative. When the US authorities learned of UK unease, Kissinger asked that Heath issue a general statement of support rather than a specific endorsement of the mining.[333] On reflection, the Cabinet Office felt it safe for the government state publicly that it recognised the US right to retaliate against DRV provocation but add that it sought (as indeed it did) to cooperate with the USSR in reactivating the 1954 Geneva conference since the Paris peace process was so stalled.[334] This statement, when issued, benefited Anglo-American relations with the Nixon administration expressing appreciation.[335] In practice, however, the idea of a revived Geneva conference went nowhere due to Soviet opposition and the Cabinet was left to hope for renewed direct US-DRV talks.[336]

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[329] Washington Embassy telegram 1549 to FCO, 8 May 1972, PREM15/1281.

[330] FCO telegram 1078 to Washington Embassy, 9 May 1972, ibid.

[331] SEAD memorandum, May 1972, FCO15/1721.

[332] FCO Legal Department memorandum, 15 May 1972, FCO15/1719.

[333] SEAD memorandum, 11 May 1972, FCO15/1723.

[334] Cabinet Office memorandum, 9 May 1972, FCO15/1719.

[335] Sohm to Douglas-Home, 10 May 1972 and Cromer to Douglas-Home, 11 May 1972, ibid.

[336] CM(72)26, 18 May 1972, CAB128/50.

Linebacker was halted in June. By then, US air-power had successfully repulsed the North Vietnamese advance (communist losses were reported to be around 100,000). In Hanoi, DRV leaders concluded that it was only US air-power that had saved South Vietnam and that it was thus wise to make concessions in the peace process that would allow full US disengagement, including its air force, so that South Vietnam would not have similar support in the future.[337]

In its own review of the offensive, the FCO unwittingly endorsed Hanoi's conclusion. Together with Lamson 719, recent military events showed the fragility of Vietnamization. 'The South Vietnamese may have taken over responsibility for the ground fighting, but they have also been conditioned to rely on massive fire power and the use of air power'. Vietnamization without US air-power was 'never a realistic aim or programme'. In a hint of "decent interval", FCO officials suspected that in the final analysis Nixon would leave South Vietnam to its fate and not re-deploy US air power once withdrawn.[338]

Nixon himself, however, was publicly confident about future prospects. The military situation had been 'turned around' by Linebacker and the mining of Haiphong, he told reporters on 30 June. In contrast to FCO assessments, he declared that 'the ability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves…has been demonstrated'. At the same time, he looked forward to 'constructive…negotiations' in Paris so that 'this war can be ended'.[339]

As previously noted, North Vietnam was now ready to make concessions in the negotiations to enable total US military withdrawal. The DRV was also thinking of "decent interval" and suspected that once the US was gone, if North Vietnam delayed long enough before conquering South Vietnam, 'the Americans would not come back even if you offered

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[337] Duiker, *Communist Road*, p.323.

[338] Tebbit to Wilford, 2 June 1972, FCO15/1670.

[339] Nixon news conference, 29 June 1972, *PPPUS*.

them candy'.[340] When the Paris talks resumed in July, US-DRV differences quickly narrowed; the Americans wanted out and the North Vietnamese wanted to make it possible for them to get out.[341] According to Kissinger, the DRV was ready to make peace was 'afraid' of the reaction of the NLF (or Provisional Revolutionary Government, as it called itself).[342] Heath, meanwhile, sent Kissinger a message of 'full support' in advance his peace agenda.[343]

Success was tantalisingly close on 8 October when Le Duc Tho made a vital concession: the DRV no longer insisted on Theiu's resignation as a condition of peace and proposed instead that the RVN and NLF-PRG join with neutrals in a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord to administer the south in the aftermath of peace. Thieu was reportedly unhappy but at least he would retain some political authority under this arrangement.[344] In the FCO, officials agreed that Tho's concession was very important and hoped that peace would soon come. But they also worried about Theiu's capacity to wreck the process – Thieu knew that without the Americans he would be living on borrowed time and had no interest in making disengagement easy for Nixon.[345]

At the same time, the UK media and public opinion was pressing the government to do all it could to help end the war; from an even more critical perspective, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) blasted Heath for standing on the sidelines as though he somehow wished the war to continue, an unfair accusation.[346] The FCO remained 'hopeful' that peace was imminent

[340] Duiker, *Sacred War,* p.244.

[341] Lawrence, *Vietnam War,* p.157.

[342] Washing Embassy telegram 2787 to FCO, 22 September 1972, PREM15/1281.

[343] FCO telegram 1987 to Washington Embassy, 23 September 1972, ibid.

[344] Lawrence, *Vietnam War,* pp.157.

[345] Squire to Wilford, 11 October 1972, FCO15/1722.

[346] Squire to Royle, 3 October 1972, FCO15/1719.

but also worried that if it did not materialise, the Americans would bomb North Vietnam again and put UK-US relations under strain.[347]

To begin with, FCO fears seemed unfounded. On 21 October, the US and DRV reached a provisional agreement.[348] Fatefully, Kissinger declared publicly that 'peace is at hand'.[349] In actual fact peace depended on Thieu, but three days later, on 24 October, South Vietnam's leader rejected the peace treaty and called for the destruction of all communist forces.[350] With this, the peace process collapsed once more. A 'dismayed' Kissinger told the UK Embassy in Washington that it was now unlikely that the process would be revived before US election day on 7 November.[351] Later, Kissinger tried to defend his premature use of the term 'peace is at hand' but the truth is that he should have waited to obtain South Vietnamese agreement.[352] Kissinger's deputy, Alexander Haig, was later very critical. 'It is hardly possible to imagine a phrase, so redolent of Neville Chamberlain and the…cult of appeasement, more likely to embarrass Nixon as President and presidential candidate, inflame Thieu's anxieties, or weaken our leverage in Hanoi'.[353]

Coming so close to election day, Nixon worried that his opponent, the Democrat George McGovern, would accuse him of playing party politics with the peace process.[354] In a public statement on 2 November, Nixon clarified his position. Kissinger had been correct in that 'substantial agreement' had been reached on 'most' of the terms of peace but 'there are still some issues to be resolved'. Determined to avoid the charge of electioneering, Nixon said that

[347] Squire to Wilford, 11 October 1972, FCO15/1722.

[348] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.664.

[349] Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p.459.

[350] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.666.

[351] Washington Embassy telegram 3126 to FCO, 25 October 1972, PREM15/1281.

[352] Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp.1399-1400.

[353] Alexander Haig, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World* (New York: Warner, 1992), p.302.

[354] Nixon, *Memoirs*, p.705.

'we are going to sign the agreement when the agreement is right' and not prematurely just so he could deliver on his 1968 promise to end the war in his first term.'[355]

In London, FCO officials admitted to 'confusion' about the on-off peace process. According to Brooks Richards, UK Ambassador in Saigon, who spoke to both American and South Vietnamese informants, Kissinger was to blame for the 'difficulty' with Thieu whom he had tried to force into acceptance at 'top speed' but ended up antagonising the 'slow and extremely suspicious' RVN President. Nevertheless, Richards suspected that the peace agreement would soon be 'patched up'.[356] To this end, the US government looked to the UK government for support, particularly in dealing with the South Vietnamese. The FCO obliged by telling the RVN Ambassador in London that Thieu needed to recognise the advantages in 'accepting' what was clearly 'the best agreement available'.[357]

In the event, Nixon won his second term by a landslide. According to the *Guardian*, the result (Nixon won 97% in the electoral college) was a referendum on Vietnam war with the 'great majority of the American people were satisfied' apparently content with Nixon's handling of the problem.[358] Nixon immediately approached Thieu to ask him to reconsider his opposition to the peace treaty. The settlement 'reflects major concessions by the other side, protects the independence of South Vietnam, and leaves the political future to the South Vietnamese people themselves', Nixon said. To reject this deal was 'unfair and self-defeating' and 'highly

[355] Nixon address, 2 November 1972, *PPPUS*.

[356] Shakespeare to Wilford, 26 October 1972, FCO15/1680.

[357] Cabinet brief, 2 November 1972, SEAD memorandum, 8 November 1972, FCO15/1682.

[358] *Guardian*, 8 November 1972.

embarrassing'.[359] The following week, Nixon offered Thieu his 'personal assurance' that if the DRV undermined the peace there would be 'swift and severe' US retaliation.[360]

Thieu, however, would not budge, and the Americans, unable to shift their ally, turned their attention to their enemy. But Hanoi would not tolerate unpicking the agreement reached with the US. The problem was Thieu, Tho told Kissinger, which made it a US problem.[361] On 29 November, Nixon then got tough with Thieu and threatened to cut off all US support to South Vietnam. 'Without aid, you can't survive,' he told him. 'Understand?'.[362]

With the peace process stuck, the British found themselves in the familiar position of trying to 'penetrate the fog' on US thinking.[363] Taking an optimistic view, the FCO Planning Staff considered the role the UK might play if a settlement did still emerge. As Geneva co-chair, Britain held 'ill-defined' responsibilities which it had been 'unable satisfactorily to discharge' with consequent 'embarrassing exposure to criticism and pressure from all quarters'. Back in 1954, the UK had played a 'decisive' role in averting a major conflict and lessening international tension so that the co-chairship arose from something worthwhile. Now, Britain was potentially facing the prospect of being asked to endorse an 'embarrassing' settlement which, unlike 1954, it had no hand in devising. The Americans should be supported, planners agreed. But this time round the UK should avoid any commitment to preserve the settlement.[364]

The FCO Southeast Asia Department concurred. In terms of UK international priorities, 'Indochina ranks low'. UK policy should focus on aiding the US to secure an 'honourable exit' and in providing Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam with moral support. A postwar

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[359] Nixon to Thieu, 8 November 1972, *FRUS 1969-1976*, Vol. 9 (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), doc. 96.

[360] Ibid, 14 November 1972, doc. 107.

[361] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, pp.101-102.

[362] Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics: the Nixon Tapes* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), p.149.

[363] Tebbit to Norris, 9 November 1972, FCO15/1682.

[364] Cable to Squire, 10 November 1972, ibid.

international conference on the 1954 model might materialise in a post-armistice future and the UK should participate with others in helping map out a programme for Southeast Asian security. But that same conference should be used to 'gracefully' relinquish the 1954 legacy.[365] Summing up, Douglas-Home defined the UK approach as 'minimum involvement at minimum cost'.[366] Here, however, the British still had one final Vietnam dilemma to contend with. By adopting an aloof attitude in the final phase of the peace process, the UK risked being accused by the US of lack of support. But too proactive a position might - as in 1954 - drag Britain into shouldering unwanted future burdens.[367]

The US-DRV exchanges in Paris continued into December, but with the Americans having failed to persuade Thieu to be flexible, failure seemed inevitable. On 13 December, Le Duc Tho decided to five up and head home.[368] Nixon was livid. The following day, he sent an ultimatum to North Vietnam to begin talking 'seriously' within 72-hours or face American wrath. To this end, Nixon ordered the US Joint Chiefs of Staff to prepare 'massive' air attacks against Hanoi and Haiphong even though, as Kissinger admitted, a settlement with North Vietnam was '99 percent completed'.[369] When the DRV ignored his ultimatum, Nixon ordered a new round of bombing to commence on 18 December. Due to the timing, it was dubbed the Christmas bombing by the Western media but its actual codename was Linebacker II. Over the next eleven days, 40,000 tons of bombs fell on the Hanoi-Haiphong. The single most intensive

[365] Squire to Wilford, 22 November 1972, ibid.

[366] FCO telegram 2417 to Washington Embassy, 24 November 1972, ibid.

[367] Sykes to Wilford, 29 November 1972, FCO15/1683.

[368] Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, p.117.

[369] Karnow, *Vietnam*, pp.666-667.

US aerial bombardment of the DRV in the entire war took place, ironically, *after* the United States and North Vietnam had reached an agreement on peace terms.[370]

The reaction both in America and the wider world was overwhelmingly unfavourable. The *New York Times* condemned the administration's 'stone age barbarism', while the *Daily Mirror* in Britain wrote of 'Nixon's Christmas Deluge of Death'.[371] Nixon later described Linebacker II as the 'most difficult' but also the most 'clear-cut and necessary' decision he took in the war.[372] Historians, however, contest this claim. 'The Christmas bombing altered the diplomatic landscape by scarcely a jot', Hastings argues, while Young maintains that 'nothing of substance was changed'.[373] On 28 December, the DRV agreed to resume talks, and the bombing stopped, but Hanoi's leaders knew that in the resumed negotiations they would likely get what had been offered by the Americans before Linebacker II. As one Nixon aide later wrote, 'we bombed the North Vietnamese into accepting our concessions'.[374] Ultimately, the bombing was aimed (indirectly) at Thieu to demonstrate what the US could do if the communists broke the peace and thus, in this way, persuade him to sign the treaty.[375]

In Britain, though the popular reaction was hostile, the Heath government found itself in a difficult position. On the one hand, there was the usual need to show backing for the US. On the other, as the guardian of 1954, the UK could not really approve of US bombing given how close a peace deal was. On 19 December, the US Embassy confirmed to the FCO that Kissinger's belief that peace was '99 percent' there was accurate but blamed the North Vietnamese for 'back-tracking'. The bombing was aimed at getting the negotiations 'back on

[370] Ruane, *War and Revolution*, p.102; Ambrose and Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism*, pp.247-248.

[371] Karnow, *Vietnam*, p.667; Hastings, *Vietnam*, p.572.

[372] Nixon, *Memoirs*, p.734.

[373] Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p.279; Hastings, *Vietnam*, pp.572-573.

[374] Negroponte in Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold Schecter, *The Palace File* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p.145.

[375] Hastings, *Vietnam*, p.573.

track'.[376] The FCO felt short-changed at being fed the 'standard administration line' and hoped that Kissinger might reveal more of the real US motivation in due course.[377]

On 21 December, the wording of a government statement sidestepping the issue of the bombing was finalised. 'HMG have always believed the right way to put an end to the Vietnam war is by negotiation' but 'inexact or loosely drafted agreements…inevitably lead to future complications', it ran.[378] Privately, Douglas-Home had sympathy for the Americans. North Vietnam, he suspected, hoped to strengthen its position by military success before resuming negotiations so the US bombing was not 'unnatural'.[379] Linebacker II put the UK in 'great difficulty', the British Embassy in Washington admitted, but based on what the Nixon administration said publicly about DRV duplicity – since shown by historians not to have existed – it was 'difficult to see what alternative the US government had' and equally hard for the UK government to issue anything other than a muted public statement.[380]

Inevitably, the Labour opposition was critical of the Heath government's failure to condemn the 'slaughter' caused by US 'terror bombing'.[381] By late December, Douglas-Home was warning ministerial colleagues that the earlier public statement was not enough and that 'senior ministers will have to comment publicly'. The problem was that the UK remained 'in the dark' as to what the US authorities were really up to.[382] On 28 December, Kissinger telephoned Douglas-Home admitting he had been 'remiss' in failing to consult properly but

[376] FCO telegram 2568 to Washington Embassy, 18 December 1972, and Washington Embassy telegram 3700 to FCO, 19 December 1972, FCO15/1683.

[377] Sykes to Wilford, 21 December 1972, ibid.

[378] *Times*, 22 December 1972.

[379] FCO telegram 299 to Washington, 21 December 1972, FCO15/1683.

[380] Washington Embassy telegram 3796 to FCO, 28 December 1972, PREM15/1281; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p.279; Hastings, *Vietnam*, pp.572-573.

[381] Tombridges to Grattan on Labour NEC statement, 21 December 1972, FCO15/1719.

[382] FCO telegram 2627 to Washington Embassy, 28 December 1972, PREM15/1281.

also asking that the government 'hold the line' in standing up for America.[383] Labour, however, kept the pressure up with Roy Jenkins, a senior figure in the shadow Cabinet, writing to Heath to express despair at the 'absence of any protest from the British Government' in response to one of the most 'cold blooded actions in recent history'. Jenkins then made his letter public.[384]

That same day, North Vietnam agreed, as we have noted, to resume talks and the bombing was stopped along with the pressure on Heath to denounce US policy. The Americans informed the British via diplomatic channels that technical US-DRV discussions would resume in Paris on 2 January 1973 and Kissinger-Le Duc Tho talks soon after.[385] No longer under pressure to talk about the bombing, on 30 December, Heath, in his first public statement since Linebacker II began, welcomed the resumption of negotiations.[386] Privately, Nixon told Heath he was 'deeply grateful' that the Prime Minister had not 'added his voice to the chorus of condemnation'.[387] In actual fact the British feared a repeat of recent events - another collapse of the peace process and another US bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Second time around, Lord Cromer warned the FCO, the government would be 'heavily pressed' to protest, and Heath, heir to 1954, would struggle to avoid 'outright condemnation of US policy'.[388]

In the event the British worried needlessly as peace was agreed surprisingly quickly. On 8 January 1973, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho resumed their discussions. The next day, Nixon's birthday, came the breakthrough. Kissinger telephoned the White House to deliver the good news. It was the 'best birthday present' he had received 'in sixty years', Nixon commented.[389]

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[383] Washington Embassy telegram 3795 to FCO, 28 December 1972, ibid.

[384] Jenkins to Heath, 28 December 1972, PREM15/1118.

[385] Washington embassy telegram 3825 to FCO, 29 December 1972, ibid.

[386] FCO telegram 2653 to Washington embassy, 30 December 1972, FCO15/1719.

[387] Saigon embassy telegram 6 to FCO, 8 January 1973, PREM15/1996.

[388] Cromer to Douglas-Home, 10 January 1973, PREM15/1996.

[389] Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 480.

Ironically, the breakthrough amounted to the DRV agreeing to sign in January 1973 the deal it had agreed to sign in October 1972 – the one the Americans failed to sell to South Vietnam.[390] This time, Thieu had come under fantastic pressure from Nixon to comply, but the US also promised South Vietnam lavish postwar financial inducements. In effect, Thieu was warned that he no longer had the 'luxury' of 'resisting'.[391]

On 23 January, the US-DRV agreement was initialled before a formal four-party peace treaty was signed four days later. In a televised broadcast from the Oval Office, Nixon claimed to have achieved his 'peace with honor'.[392] It was peace for America, certainly, but not for Vietnam. Later, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but while Kissinger accepted, Tho refused on the grounds that there was no peace.[393]

To 'welcome' the signing of the agreement, the FCO in London issued a statement expressing relief that the fighting was ended after 'so many terrible years of conflict'.[394] In Cabinet, it was agreed that however the settlement played out, the UK should at all costs avoid any responsibility for its upkeep as an 'international umpire' as it had done with the 1954 settlement.[395]

On 1 February, Heath arrived in Washington for scheduled talks with Nixon. The meeting occurred at an 'auspicious' moment following the signing of the Paris peace treaty, Heath told American reporters. 'We, in Britain, have greatly admired the steadfastness with which you have pursued the objective of securing peace'.[396] The majority of the talks took

[390] Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, p.367.

[391] Karnow, Vietnam, pp.668-669.

[392] Nixon statement, 23 January 1973, *PPPUS*.

[393] Jay Nordlinger, *Peace They Say: A History of the Nobel Peace Prize* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), p.215.

[394] Douglas-Home statement, 24 January 1973, FCO15/1843.

[395] CM(73)4, 30 January 1973, CAB128/51.

[396] Nixon and Heath statements, 1 February 1973, *PPPUS*.

place at Camp David and were 'completely informal', Heath recalled, 'relaxing, and conducive to a real exchange of views.[397] On Vietnam, Nixon was grateful to Heath for his 'firm stand' on the Christmas bombing (Heath had been the only European leader not to publicly criticise the US). 'What you did, did not go unnoticed', Nixon said. Heath felt that all depended on the DRV's readiness to uphold the agreement and, by extension, on US readiness to reopen combat involvement if the peace collapsed. Nixon agreed. And agreed, too, that US-UK relations were in good order.[398]

On his return to London, Heath reported to the Cabinet on 'very successful' talks.[399] The "special relationship" was still in place, it seemed, but in the final phase of the Vietnam war it had required Heath and his government to condone a US approach to the peace process that was disingenuous and violent. Heath, though, was unapologetic. The end, peace, was worth the means Nixon used. Within eighteen months, Nixon would have resigned in ignominy over Watergate, but Heath did not revise his assessment. 'What a tragedy', he lamented in his memoirs, 'that Watergate should have wiped Richard Nixon's achievements from the public mind'.[400]

[397] Heath, *Course of My Life*, p.492.

[398] Nixon-Heath talks, 1 February 1973, PREM15/1996; Robin Renwick, *Fighting with Allies: America and Britain in Peace and War* (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 299.

[399] CM(73)5, 8 February 1973, CAB128/51.

[400] Heath, *Course of My Life*, p.493.

CONCLUSION

The UK was obviously not directly involved in the closing phase of the US war in Vietnam, 1969 to 1973, but as in the past – in 1945, for example, when Britain helped restore French sovereignty in Indochina, or 1954 when it played the leading role in ending the French war, or in 1965 to 1967 when it proposed several peace initiatives – the UK did have a role, mainly diplomatic and in connection with its "special relationship" to one of the chief combatants, America. The Nixon administration sought UK support for its Vietnam policy and wherever possible, the Wilson Labour government (1969-1970), and the Heath Conservative government (1970 onwards) tried to supply that support.

As this dissertation has shown, the UK approach to Vietnam in the concluding phase of the American war is a neglected area of historical research - almost as if historians decided that once Nixon became US President in January 1969 and dedicated himself to "peace with honor" that all UK interest in the issue ceased. This, however, was clearly not true. As this study has shown, both Labour and Conservatives governments worried at various times that US policy, even in the peace phase of the war, could suddenly turn and dangerous military escalation could follow that would draw in China and even the USSR at a time when Cold War détente, which the UK approved of, seemed within reach.

As previously noted, the main context for UK policy on Vietnam in the 1969-1973 period was the "special relationship". UK decisions on Vietnam, and on Laos and Cambodia, too, had to be judged against the extent that they supported the US, and therefore the "special relationship", or challenged the US and risked damaging the Anglo-American relationship. The Wilson Labour government proved adept at balancing the two parts of this equation; it continued to publicly back the Nixon administration but without ever going so far as to give unqualified support for US policy, unless it was the Paris peace process, bearing in mind the

significant level of anti-American attitudes on the left of the parliamentary Labour party. The most unexpected finding of this dissertation was the extent to which Heath and the Conservatives backed the United States in public and often without the qualifications that the Labour government had added to its own support of America. Heath has the reputation of being the most sceptical of all UK postwar leaders about the importance of the Anglo-American relationship for Britain and while falling short of being anti-American, he is usually depicted as preferring a special relationship between Britain and Europe. Yet on Vietnam - notably the Laotian crisis in 1971 and the Christmas bombing of 1972 - the Heath government defied public and parliamentary opinion in Britain by refusing to openly condemn US policy. This stance was much appreciated by the Nixon administration.

This in some ways was probably what Heath wanted – to win goodwill in Washington in order to balance out the American suspicion of his pro-European outlook. Since the 1950s successive US administrations had approved of the idea of the UK joining the European community, but by the early 1970s, US leaders, especially Henry Kissinger but also Nixon at times, seemed to have become schizophrenic on this issue. The Nixon administration on the one hand publicly backed UK entry to the EEC, but on the other hand it privately complained that UK closeness to Europe demanded that the US consult less closely with the UK in case private or sensitive information ended up being passed all round Europe by the British government. In London, Heath and Douglas-Home and others were aware of this inconsistency and by backing US policy on Vietnam - or by not criticising it, which amounted to the same thing - they may have hoped to maintain good relations with Washington. Even the pro-European Heath did not see the future as a choice between a UK special relationship with Europe or the US. He seems to have wanted closeness to Europe to act as an additional support for the UK not a substitute for the traditional UK relationship with America. However, the fact

remains that on Vietnam, Heath's default position – which may be a surprise to some people – was to back Nixon at almost every point.

Apart from the UK's ties to America, another important reason why Britain took more than a passing interest in the Vietnam war after 1969 was the legacy of Geneva 1954. Once the all-Vietnam reunification elections failed to happen in 1956 and the temporary division of Vietnam into a communist north and a non-communist south took on a more permanent quality, the UK, along with the USSR, the co-chairs of the 1954 Geneva conference, acquired responsibility for getting the situation back to where it was supposed to be according to the 1954 settlement. Over the years that followed, the ongoing UK responsibility for Geneva was both an advantage and a disadvantage. On the positive side, it allowed Britain in the 1960s and into the 1970s to retain a high-profile international role on a major issue at a time when more generally UK power and influence was felt to be in decline. On the negative side, it did not always help Anglo-American relations.

In the mid-1960s, the UK Labour government used Geneva as a justification for refusing to send troops to Vietnam to support the US on the grounds that as the architect of 1954 the UK needed to be seen to help try and restore peace. This clearly irritated the Johnson administration. Later in the 1960s, the Labour government took the lead in trying to broker peace initiatives, again because of its commitment to Geneva, and again with the same negative impact in the US. As this dissertation has shown, the legacy of 1954 can be seen in the 1969 to 1973 period but with a difference. While the Wilson government continued to use Geneva as a reason to qualify its support of US policy when that policy appeared to be wrong or misguided, the Heath government from 1970 found the legacy of 1954 a complicating factor given its tendency to seek to back the US on Vietnam. By the end of the war in 1973, the Heath government welcomed the Paris peace settlement but was adamant that in contrast to 1954, the UK should not assume any responsibility for protecting that agreement going forward.

To conclude, the UK played a more active diplomatic and political role in the final phase of the US war in Vietnam than is often supposed, partly for reasons connected with the "special relationship", and partly for reasons relating to the legacy of Geneva in 1954. In the end, the Conservative government of Edward Heath was much more positively pro-American than the Labour government of Harold Wilson, and this was probably related to the need to win US goodwill in connection with UK EEC entry. At the same time, however, as this study has shown, the Heath government privately might not have agreed with US methods in Vietnam but it did believe in the importance of containing communism in Southeast Asia, where the UK retained Commonwealth and other interests, and to that end that the Nixon administration deserved British backing in public.

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