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**THE ELECTION CYCLE, AND THE U.S.  
WITHDRAWAL FROM VIETNAM**

by

**Steven Thomas Stoddard**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**DEPARTMENT HONORS**

in

**Political Science**

**Approved:**

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**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Logan, UT**

**Fall, 2005**

## The Election Cycle and the U.S. Withdrawal From Vietnam (1968-1973)

Few events in American history have proved to be as divisive and controversial as U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Although U.S. policy in Indochina has its roots in the Truman Administration, the two presidents most closely associated with the conflict are Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. These two are particularly important because they both occupied the White House during the highest levels of direct U.S. involvement in the war. In terms of troop deployments to Southeast Asia, the level and intensity of U.S. involvement peaked under the Johnson Administration and it was at this time that the war began to be the focus of one of the largest and most controversial social-political movements that this country has ever seen.

In the 1960's the anti-war movement both competed and commingled with the Civil Rights movement and, like the Civil Rights movement before it, the anti-war movement started from very small and humble beginnings:<sup>1</sup> In its infancy in the early sixties the movement was mostly concentrated on or around college campuses; however, towards the latter part of Johnson's first term in late 1967 and into 1968, the anti-war movement—or more importantly the anti-war message—had gained so much momentum that the majority of Americans began to believe that U.S. entry into the war had been a mistake.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing this trend, many of the candidates for the presidency in 1968 began campaigning with the promise that they would end the war if they were elected. This list included not only Democratic candidates like Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and later Hubert Humphrey; but also Republican candidate Richard M. Nixon,

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Fairclough, "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the War in Vietnam," *Phylon* 45 (1984): 19.

<sup>2</sup> William L. Lunch & Peter W. Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam," *The Western Political Quarterly* 32 (1979): 25.

the eventual winner who campaigned with the now famous promise that he had a “secret plan” to end the war.<sup>3</sup>

Curiously, though, the war was not brought to a prompt close. Although Nixon was elected in November of 1968, the peace agreement that finally ended U.S. involvement in the conflict was not signed until more than four years later on January 27, 1973.<sup>4</sup> In fact, while Nixon did scale down the number of U.S. troops involved in the conflict, some of the other policies he pursued actually seemed to be *escalating* the war: In his first term in office he expanded the mandate of “Operation Phoenix” to authorize direct assassination of suspected communist political leaders by U.S. troops resulting in the deaths of over 50,000 Vietnamese,<sup>5</sup> he greatly widened the scope of the bombing campaign to include Cambodia and North Vietnam, and he also authorized an invasion of Laos and the mining of Haiphong Harbor.<sup>6</sup> If a general consensus around the need to end the war in Vietnam was starting to form in 1968, then why did it take so long to actually bring the conflict to a successful conclusion? That is the central research question of this study.

I recognize that there were many factors that contributed to something as complex as the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and rather than address them all individually and superficially, I have decided to do an in-depth qualitative study of the one that I consider to be the most important in determining the substance and, most importantly, the timing

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<sup>3</sup> William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II 4<sup>th</sup> ed.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 376.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Anderson, ed., *Shadow on the White House: Presidents and the Vietnam War, 1945-1975*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1993). 176.

<sup>5</sup> The Assassination program of the Phoenix Operation (actually a joint program with the South Vietnamese government) was one of the most controversial actions of the entire war, and there is still some dispute as to the actual number of deaths that can be attributed to it.

<sup>5</sup> Chafe, 389-399.

<sup>6</sup> Chafe, 389-399.

of the U.S. withdrawal—the U.S. election cycle. In many ways, this is a difficult task to accomplish not only because of the exceptional nature of the Vietnam case, but also because most of the existing scholarly literature I have been able to find dealing with election cycles focus more on domestic factors like the business cycle on presidential elections. Even then, the small minority of the literature that I did find on election cycles and armed conflict or foreign policy focus almost exclusively on the influence election cycles have on states getting *into* wars rather than getting *out* of them. I find this omission to be rather remarkable considering the fact that if election cycles play a significant role in the timing of states getting involved in armed conflict, then it makes logical sense that they can also play a role on the opposite end in getting out of those conflicts as well.

In this paper I begin by reviewing some of the relevant scholarly literature on election cycles and foreign policy and/or war. After establishing some of the basic characteristics that are normally associated with the impact of the electoral cycle on foreign policy, I then briefly try to qualify some of the limitations in using that approach on the particular case of Vietnam because of its exceptional nature in some respects. Nevertheless, the electoral cycle approach remains a very useful tool in examining and understanding the conduct, and most importantly the timing of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, and in the second section I apply the developments of that withdrawal (1968-1973) within the election cycle framework. Of particular importance in this section are the presidential election of 1968, and the coalescence of public opinion around the need to end the war after the Tet offensive in January of that year. Other absolutely crucial elements that are examined are the actions taken by the Johnson and Nixon

Administrations to end the war. In the conclusion, I summarize the findings arrived at in the previous section, and suggest that more studies on election cycles and war are needed, particularly concerning the resolution of conflict.

### **THE IMPACT OF ELECTION CYCLES ON WAR AND FOREIGN POLICY**

Although they were not explicitly writing about the foreign policy consequences of cycling, Resnick and Thomas wrote a general article on cyclical theories of politics that explains some basic characteristics that are worth mentioning. One of the most useful characteristics of using cyclical theories is that they greatly simplify predicting outcomes by assuming that all other variables are constant and that time is the only significant independent variable. Time can be used to measure a self-generating and observable repeating sequence in either fixed or relative terms, but the predictive power of any cyclical theory rests on its ability to accurately and consistently predict the approximate time necessary to complete a full cycle.<sup>7</sup> The authors also split cycling theory into 3 broad and non-mutually exclusive categories of value, electoral, and governing cycles with electoral cycles generally operating on much shorter intervals than the longer term value and governing cycles. In their conclusions the authors acknowledge that, just as economists are unable to fully explain the business cycle, proving how or why events cycle is extremely difficult. However, that does not change the fact that understanding that the cycles exist is still very useful for prediction.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The example they use to illustrate this point is to say that America has been experiencing cycles of war and peace for its entire history, but unless a theory can state something more specific such as America goes to war every N years, it is not very useful for predictive purposes.

<sup>8</sup> David Resnick, and Norman C. Thomas, "Cycling Through American Politics," *Polity* 23 (1990): 1-21.

Since a focus on the electoral cycle is the particular approach I take in this paper, it is now time to examine the relevant literature on election cycles and international relations. In a study examining electoral cycles and war among democratic states, Kurt Taylor Gaubatz examined 69 different cases involving 17 democratic states in 45 wars from 1815-1980. He found that there is strong statistical evidence suggesting that the initiation of a war right before an election is an extreme rarity, particularly with serious wars involving over 1,000 battle deaths. There are only 3 cases in that time period where a democracy entered a serious war in the year before an election—a statistical significance of over 99%. Conversely, there is also a disproportionate concentration of war initiations at the beginning of an electoral cycle. Out of 42 cases there are only 5 instances where an election occurred more than 2 years prior to the entry into a war. The author's aggregate data for serious wars entered into at the beginning of an electoral cycle are also statistically significant above the 99% level.<sup>9</sup>

While this data undeniably proves a strong statistical correlation between electoral cycles and the timing of war initiation, Gaubatz is very quick to point out the causal ambiguities inherent in the data. Do elections cause candidates to rattle the saber on the campaign trail so much that they find themselves locked into a course of action that will lead to conflict with neighboring states shortly thereafter, or do elections cause candidates to pursue appeasement to the point that it encourages aggressive actions by strong neighbors wishing to impose their will? These are just some of the possible causal explanations that can be formulated to explain the relationship, and it is another good example of the great level of difficulty in proving *how* cyclical theories actually function. Another more disturbing possibility brought up by the author, though, is that “although

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<sup>9</sup> Kurt Taylor Gaubatz, “Election Cycles and War,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 35 (1991): 212-244.

elections may discourage democracies from entering wars in the short run, they may encourage other kinds of behaviors that make war either more likely or more severe in the long run,” such as encouraging a “hesitancy to take decisive action when international pressures may require it.”<sup>10</sup>

Writing about presidential reelections and the use of force, Stoll utilizes the rational self-interest perspective and argues that presidential incumbents’ desire to win reelection will lead them to use force abroad in visible ways that will help them achieve that goal. He hypothesizes that in the year of a reelection and the first year of a president’s second term, the number of visible uses of force by the U.S. will be low if they are not in (or close to) a war, and that they will be higher if the U.S. is involved in (or close to) a war. He tests this by running a statistical analysis comparing both results to the average use of force with no election and no war during the period 1947-1982. After controlling for a number of potentially confounding variables, he concludes that there is mild evidence to support his original thesis.<sup>11</sup>

Stoll’s findings are not exceedingly remarkable and, like Gaubatz, he admits that he cannot establish any causal direction. Also, in dealing with visible uses of force, Stoll seems to focus more on the “rally-around-the-flag” phenomenon associated with the initial use of force, and its susceptibility to political manipulation rather than any other aspect of the use of force that might be applicable to the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> That war was started long before the withdrawal began which diminishes the possibility of an initial use of force rally-around-the-flag phenomenon from effecting the elections of

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<sup>10</sup> Gaubatz, 237-238.

<sup>11</sup> Richard J. Stoll, “The Guns of November: Presidential Reelections and the Use of Force, 1947-1982,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 28 (1984): 231-246.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 233.



1968 or 1972. However, this does not mean that his findings are completely useless because if we accept the rational self-interest perspective of presidents seeking reelection and their willingness to use force abroad in order to achieve this goal, then it is certainly plausible that the same phenomenon could work in reverse, and that presidents would decrease the use of force in order to end a conflict abroad right before an election should it prove to be politically expedient. This same logic can be used to turn around, and possibly even complement Gaubatz's findings on the paucity of war initiation right before elections.

Thus far, the scholarly literature I have discussed has only dealt with generalities of cycles and their broad tendencies concerning the timing of democratic states' entrance into armed conflict. I would love to include more detailed accounts of the effect of the election cycle on the cessation of hostilities, but I have been unable to find anything that explicitly deals with that particular aspect. For this reason, I have tried to take the existing literature and demonstrate that reversing the focus of those studies does not necessarily contradict their conclusions and, in fact, seems to retain a high degree of plausibility. The last article I will discuss is both the most general and, probably for that reason, the most useful article I have been able to find that deals with the effect of the presidential election cycle on foreign policy as far as the withdrawal from Vietnam is concerned, and it is this article that serves as the primary model for my analysis.

William B. Quandt has argued that there are several fundamental problems associated with presidential conduct of foreign policy that are constitutionally rooted in the 4-year cycle of presidential elections, particularly in the first term. He argues that the same divisions of power and system of checks and balances that are so desirable and

widely applauded for their beneficial qualities on the domestic level have had decidedly negative effects when it comes to foreign policy; "The price we pay is a foreign policy excessively geared to short-term calculations, in which narrow domestic political considerations often outweigh sound strategic thinking, and where turnover in high positions is so frequent that consistency and coherence are lost."<sup>13</sup>

Specifically, Quandt identifies several general problems that are associated with each year of a new president's first term, and the general lame-duck problems that they face during a second term. In the first year of a new president's first term he is usually largely inexperienced in foreign affairs, and generally commits several mistakes and/or pursues unrealistic policies due to overconfidence or wishful thinking in his ability to change the international order. The first year is a time of learning characterized by trial-and-error as he familiarizes himself with a largely new component of power and begins working out a new management style to deal with it. The first year usually ends with a reassessment of the now stalled policies he began pursuing at the beginning. The second year is usually characterized by greater success brought on by pursuing more realistic and less ambitious goals, and a greater reliance on the experts within the foreign policy bureaucracy. By this point, a greater level of trust has usually been gained, and most of the dissenters have either been purged or resigned.

Risky ventures are usually left until the third year to avoid any electoral repercussions in the mid-term elections if such a policy fails. Reelection concerns start manifesting themselves at this point, and there is usually a push for a big foreign policy success: "The administration will even be prepared on occasions to pay heavily with

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<sup>13</sup> William B. Quandt, "The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (1986): 826.

concessions or with promises of aid and arms to get an agreement,” and “the price of agreement may become very high as the parties to negotiations realize how badly Washington wants a success.”<sup>14</sup> However, if the probability for success is low, bold initiatives will be quickly abandoned before they can start having a negative effect on the reelection chances during the final year of the first term.

In the fourth year of a president’s first term he is usually too busy campaigning to seriously commit himself to major foreign policy initiatives. He generally tends to keep foreign policy rhetoric patriotic but vague, and avoids beginning any new initiatives. Major foreign policy successes are rare in the 4<sup>th</sup> year because of the time requirements of campaigning, and also because other states are reluctant to negotiate with someone unless they are sure that that individual will still be in the White House after November. The first year and a half of a president’s second term is usually when he has the most power. Receiving a fresh electoral mandate and benefiting from the experience gained in his first term, a president is usually given free rein to accomplish his agenda. However, depending on the outcome of the mid-term elections, he is increasingly confronted with lame duck problems, and congressional opposition toward the final two years of their presidency.<sup>15</sup>

In sum: “a learning process seems invariably to take place in the course of a four-year term. By the end, most presidents recognize that some of what they tried early in their term was unrealistic; they have become more familiar with the limits on their power; they aim lower and pay more attention to the timing of their major moves.”<sup>16</sup> Although some of Quandt’s generalizations do not apply to the case of the U.S. withdrawal from

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<sup>14</sup> Quandt, 832.

<sup>15</sup> The preceding paragraphs comprise a general summary of Quandt’s findings, 829-833.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 829.

Vietnam, most of them fit the case so well that it establishes a useful body of evidence in support of the conclusion that the electoral cycle played a major role in both the content and timing of the Johnson and Nixon Administrations' attempts to end the war.

### **The Exceptional Nature of the Vietnam Case**

Before I get into the application of the Vietnam case, it is important to note a few things that make it an exception to some of the rules and generalities discussed above. First of all, for a variety of reasons the Vietnam War was more complex, and on a scale greater than any U.S. intervention since World War II. It saw the intersection of a civil war with the geopolitical interests of all three major Cold War powers, and because of this, the number of players involved in the war and its settlement were unusually large—a major factor that contributed to the great complexity of the situation. There were four main participants in the Paris peace talks: the United States, the Government of South Vietnam in Saigon (GVN), the government of North Vietnam in Hanoi (NVN), and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG)—the political wing of the Vietcong and National Liberation Front (NLF). In addition to those four main players, the Soviet Union, Peoples' Republic of China, and France—who hosted the peace talks—all played some smaller, but important roles as well.

Aside from the complexity of the situation, another exception is that Richard Nixon was not the typical first-term president inexperienced in foreign policy that Quandt's electoral cycle model generally assumes to be the case. He had gained significant foreign policy experience while serving as Eisenhower's Vice-President for eight years, and he entered the office with a clear idea of what direction he wanted to take

the country in terms of détente with China and the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Another dissimilarity was that Johnson dropped out of the race for reelection on March 31, 1968.<sup>18</sup> This means that any rational self-interest approach to analyzing Johnson's actions in the last part of his final term cannot really be applied. At least not unless it can be proven, as some people suspected at the time, that had he been successful in making a major breakthrough before the election he would have reentered the race during the convention as the peace candidate.<sup>19</sup> While that is definitely a possibility, it is unfortunately an event that can never be proven and will have to be abandoned in order to prevent tainting the analysis with hypothetical motivational theories.

However, while Johnson was not running for reelection in 1968, in many respects Hubert Humphrey was. As Johnson's Vice-President, Humphrey was inexorably tied to Johnson's war policy in the public mind.<sup>20</sup> Humphrey repeatedly had wanted to distance himself from the administration, but Johnson had always responded by putting pressure on him to stay in line.<sup>21</sup> Late in the election, though, Humphrey finally broke with the Administration in a famous speech in Salt Lake City on Sept. 29, and while this did lead to a late surge for the Vice-President, he was still unable to defeat Nixon.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Melvin Small, "The Election of 1968," *Diplomatic History* 28 (2004): 515. In 1967, Nixon wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* where he argued that the U.S. should try to improve its relations with China; a notable shift from his earlier anti-communist stance, and a clear indication of what he wanted to accomplish with détente.

<sup>18</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, (New York: Warner Books, 1982). 140.

<sup>19</sup> Small, 520.

<sup>20</sup> Converse, et al., 1090.

<sup>21</sup> Page & Brody, 990; Small, 522.

<sup>22</sup> Small, 525.

## THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM VIETNAM (1968-1973)

The Vietnam War was often cited as the most important issue facing the country throughout this time period, and it played a very important role in the election of 1968.<sup>23</sup> That year was particularly significant because it was also the year that saw the turnaround and crystallization of American public opinion against the war.<sup>24</sup> Noting this change—as well as the change in his own popularity that was brought on by it—President Johnson decided to drastically alter his previous policy and attempt to end the war through negotiations from May to November of 1968. After those efforts failed, President Nixon still recognized the necessity to end the war swiftly while simultaneously obtaining “peace with honor.”<sup>25</sup>

In order to accomplish this, Nixon initially utilized the “Madman Theory,” a strategy designed to intimidate the North Vietnamese into settling the conflict on U.S. terms.<sup>26</sup> In order to buy time domestically throughout this process Nixon also began the gradual phasing out of U.S. combat troops, while simultaneously training and equipping South Vietnamese forces of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN aka RVNAF) to take their place. This de-Americanization process was originally suggested as an option by Clark Clifford when he replaced Robert McNamara as Johnson’s Secretary of Defense, but when implemented under Nixon it came to be known as “Vietnamization.”<sup>27</sup> As the war dragged on, however, it became apparent that the North Vietnamese were not being coerced into cooperating. Furthermore, the success of Vietnamization was brought

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 528.

<sup>24</sup> Lunch & Sperlich, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Chafe, 388.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy*, (Lawrence Kansas: Universtiy of Kansas Press, 2004) 55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 77; Larry Berman, *Lyndon Johnson's War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).

into question as the ARVN consistently underperformed both offensively and defensively in direct engagements with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA aka PAVN).

As the Madman Theory failed to achieve the desired results, a shift in goals began occurring within the Nixon Administration. In late 1970 and early 1971 a growing consensus began to emerge that the most feasible solution to end the conflict would be to achieve a “decent interval” between the U.S. withdrawal and a possible victory of the North Vietnamese over the South.<sup>28</sup> Significant progress toward the attainment of this goal was achieved toward the latter part of 1971 and more explicitly in 1972 when the U.S.—through secret diplomacy in Paris involving NSC Advisor Henry Kissinger and representatives from the Hanoi Government—began making serious concessions from their previous bargaining positions. Although this negotiation process encountered several hang-ups along the way, it almost succeeded in ending the conflict before the election in November 1972, and eventually resulted in the conclusion of the negotiations on January 13, 1973.<sup>29</sup>

### **Public Opinion and the Election of 1968**

The year 1968 was perhaps the most turbulent single year in American History since the end of post-Civil War reconstruction, and the presidential election was greatly influenced by that environment. Although a majority of Americans began to believe that the war was a mistake in late 1967, at that point their preferred policy outcome to end the war was actually one of escalation.<sup>30</sup> That soon changed when the North Vietnamese

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, (Lawrence Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998) 240.

<sup>29</sup> Tad Szulc, “How Kissinger Did It: Behind the Vietnam Cease-Fire Agreement,” *Foreign Policy* 15 (1974): 63.

<sup>30</sup> Lunch & Sperlich, 25.

launched the massive Tet Offensive on January 31, 1968.<sup>31</sup> This event, which received broad news coverage in America, is widely considered to be the major turning point for public opinion against further escalation of the war, and the fallout from Tet was tremendously damaging to the Johnson Administration.<sup>32</sup> After Eugene McCarthy, the anti-war challenger to Johnson for the Democratic presidential nomination, captured 42% of the primary vote in New Hampshire and Robert Kennedy—another anti-war candidate—entered the race in March, it became clear that Johnson would not be able to recapture the Democratic Party nomination for the presidency. In a pivotal speech to the nation on March 31, he announced that he was going to issue a bombing halt and deny General Westmoreland's request for 206,000 additional troops and an activation of the reserves. He also signaled his willingness to negotiate with the North Vietnamese, and announced that he would not seek reelection for a second term.<sup>33</sup> Public opinion was not the only driving factor in his decision to deny Westmoreland's request, though, because at that point in the midst of a deepening economic crisis in March, a further escalation of that magnitude had become an economic as well as a political impossibility.<sup>34</sup>

The war was such an important issue in the 1968 election that when asked on election day what the most pressing problem Washington faced was, "nearly half the people spontaneously mentioned Vietnam—far more than mentioned any other issue or

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<sup>31</sup> Berman, 145.

<sup>32</sup> Chafe, 347; Lunch & Sperlich, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Small, 520. It is important to note that not all those who voted for McCarthy wanted to de-escalate the war. A vote for McCarthy was generally viewed as an anti-Johnson vote, and in fact "as many as 40% of McCarthy voters favored escalation rather than withdrawal." (Small, 519). Other estimates put that ratio as high as 3:2 in favor of escalation (Converse et. al, 1092). The important thing is that disaffection with the Johnson Administration on the war was so great that he would have had severe difficulties had he stayed in the race.

<sup>34</sup> Robert M. Collins, "The Economic Crisis of 1968 and the Waning of the 'American Century,'" *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 417.



cluster of issues.”<sup>35</sup> As remarkable as this statistic is, it does not accurately represent the pervasiveness of the war as an issue in the election. The reason for this is because the war was also tied to almost every other important issue in some way or another. The two most important election issues other than the war were Civil Rights and “law and order,” and it is easy to see how they were both influenced by the Vietnam War.<sup>36</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., in a very controversial move, began speaking out against the war in February, 1967, and anti-war protests were a main source of the civil disobedience and radicalism that brought the many confrontations with the police which created the appearance of a breakdown in law and order.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of this breakdown in law and order occurred during the Democratic National Convention in August. In the aftermath of those brutal and televised police-beatings of anti-war protestors, only 3% of the population was sympathetic to the protestors—a surprisingly low number considering the majority of the population also felt that the war was a mistake.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, although the economic crisis of 1968 is usually overlooked because of everything else going on in that watershed year, the chronic balance-of-payment deficits were greatly exacerbated by expenditures on the war. This effectively “sparked off a round of inflation that twisted the economy out of shape, with consequences that would still be felt decades later.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Benjamin I. Page, and Richard A. Brody, “Policy Voting and the Electoral Process: The Vietnam War Issue,” *The American Political Science Review* 66 (1972): 982.

<sup>36</sup> Philip E. Converse, et al., “Continuity and Change in American Politics: Parties and Issues in the 1968 Election,” *The American Political Science Review* 63 (1969): 1088.

<sup>37</sup> Fairclough, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Converse et al., 1088

<sup>39</sup> Collins, 196-197. Other contributing factors to the economic crisis that the author cites are the gold exchange standard, international monetary speculation and crises, and the Johnson Administration’s complete refusal to raise taxes to prevent economic overheating until it was too late (410).

Although the war had a profound effect on almost every aspect of the election, ironically the major party candidates' positions on the war had almost no effect on how people voted.<sup>40</sup> The major reason for this was because in the public perception there was very little difference between Humphrey's and Nixon's stances on the war.<sup>41</sup> This inability to distinguish differences was not a simple case of uninformed voters because the electorate could successfully discern that third party candidate George Wallace and his running-mate Curtis LeMay—derogatorily nicknamed the “Bombsey Twins” by some—took a much stronger stance on Vietnam, and that Eugene McCarthy was generally viewed as a more dovish candidate.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the people who thought there was a big difference between Humphrey and Nixon concerning the war merely “projected their own opinions onto their favored candidate.”<sup>43</sup> These perceptions and misperceptions were both fed by the candidates' ambiguous language and lack of specific policies, but the important thing to note is that both candidates were promising that they would end the war. That both major party candidates would take nearly indistinguishable stances on the war issue is an excellent indicator of the public mood at the time, and clearly demonstrates the consensus around the need to end the war that existed in 1968.

The desire to end the war should not be confused with a desire for a complete withdrawal, however, because that was certainly not the case. Support for a withdrawal from Vietnam in the public opinion polls did not top 50% until very late 1970 and early

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<sup>40</sup> Page & Brody, 982.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 983.

<sup>42</sup> Small, 525; Page & Brody, 992.

<sup>43</sup> Page & Brody, 986.

1971, which meant that the newly elected president had some time in the beginning to try and end the war through other means.<sup>44</sup>

### **1968: Johnson's Early Efforts to End the War and the Nixon Response**

By announcing his willingness to begin peace talks in the unprecedented speech on March 31, Johnson reversed his longstanding policy of refusing to negotiate with the North Vietnamese, and for the first time since the war began it appeared like real progress could be made on the diplomatic front. In April, the North Vietnamese agreed to meet in Paris, and the talks formally began in May.<sup>45</sup> The North Vietnamese chose Paris as the location for the talks largely because it was viewed as a neutral location, and for the next five years the French would do their best to preserve that neutral image while the sporadic negotiations were taking place.<sup>46</sup>

The talks initially got off to a slow start, mostly because Johnson was not willing to give up much in the negotiations. Part of the problem stemmed from severe disagreements and infighting among his top advisors. Hard liners like Dean Rusk fought bitterly to push for maximum military pressure while Doves like Clark Clifford favored a "mutual de-escalation and disengagement through negotiations, even at the expense of South Vietnam."<sup>47</sup> After some delays, Johnson finally settled on pursuing a tough negotiating stance while simultaneously putting on military pressure, a stance that clearly leaned toward the Rusk faction.<sup>48</sup> He instructed his chief negotiator, Averell Harriman,

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<sup>44</sup> Lunch & Sperlich, 26.

<sup>45</sup> George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 164; Small, 520.

<sup>46</sup> Marianna P. Sullivan, "France and the Vietnam Peace Settlement," *Political Science Quarterly*, 89 (1974): 310.

<sup>47</sup> Herring, 165.

<sup>48</sup> Herring, 167.

that he was to obtain a “communist promise to stop attacks on cities in South Vietnam, to respect the demilitarized zone, and to accept South Vietnam’s participation in the peace talks,” and that there would only be a bombing halt if it would not disadvantage the military.<sup>49</sup> The president’s “hard-line, no-concessions approach to the Paris talks...offered no incentive to the North Vietnamese to enter into substantive discussions, and the talks dragged into the summer with no discernable progress.”<sup>50</sup>

Although Johnson had received word through the Soviet Union in early June that North Vietnam was “ready to negotiate if the United states would stop the bombing,” and received essentially the same message directly from the North Vietnamese in private talks again in mid-September, Johnson remained reluctant to commit to any bombing halt unless he was absolutely certain that he would get a reciprocal concession from the North.<sup>51</sup> Progress towards a guarantee of that concession came in late September and early October, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the Soviet Union. Recognizing Humphrey’s campaign was in trouble and fearing that the anti-communist Nixon would win the election, the Soviets began pressuring North Vietnam to “soften their terms for opening serious peace talks.”<sup>52</sup> Their efforts paid off, and on October 11 a major breakthrough in the talks occurred when the North Vietnamese agreed to accept the participation of the Government of South Vietnam in the peace talks in exchange for a bombing halt that was to take place on October 31<sup>st</sup>.<sup>53</sup> Johnson and his advisors,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid; Small, 520.

<sup>50</sup> Herring, 170.

<sup>51</sup> Herring, 171,172.

<sup>52</sup>The Soviet Union was so worried about Nixon winning the election that they also offered Humphrey “under-the-table financial support, which, of course, Humphrey refused.” Small, 525, 526.

<sup>53</sup> Herring, 172; Small, 526.

particularly the doves, were pleased with the turn of events and believed that a significant step toward peace had been achieved with the agreement to begin serious negotiations.

The Nixon camp did not just sit idly by and wait for Johnson to end the war, though. As the negotiations with the North Vietnamese progressed in October, the Nixon campaign became increasingly worried that Johnson was trying to get Humphrey reelected by ending the war.<sup>54</sup> In early October, through his contacts in the Johnson Administration, Henry Kissinger found out about the bombing halt and that negotiations would begin at the end of the month. Recognizing the importance of the situation, and hedging his bets for a possible Republican victory in November, Kissinger leaked that information to the Nixon campaign.<sup>55</sup> In an attempt to counteract this positive development in the peace talks by Johnson, the Nixon campaign stealthily used Anna Chennault's contacts within the South Vietnamese government to deliver the Republican position that Saigon should "hold fast and not participate in the peace talks," because Nixon would offer them a better deal after he was elected.<sup>56</sup> Although Nixon argued that he could not reveal how he would end the war in Vietnam on the grounds that, "an explanation might interfere with the efforts of the Johnson Administration to achieve a settlement," and that "words from an irresponsible candidate might 'torpedo' the deliberations," it is obvious that the actions the Nixon campaign took in October were intended to do just that.<sup>57</sup>

The overall effect that those efforts had on disrupting the successful resolution of the conflict before the election, though, is actually rather negligible since it is widely

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<sup>54</sup> Kimball, (1998): 59.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>56</sup> Small, 527.

<sup>57</sup> Page & Brody, 988.

accepted that Thieu would have rejected the deal even without any encouragement on their part.<sup>58</sup> The important thing to note about this development is that it clearly illustrates the willingness of both Nixon and Kissinger to politicize the war for domestic electoral purposes. The Chennault affair sets a clear precedent and implies that if they were willing to politicize the war in 1968, then there is no reason to believe that they would not also be as willing to do so in 1972.

Thieu delayed his public rejection of the deal the U.S. had made with the North until the day before the bombing halt was to go into effect—six days before the U.S. election.<sup>59</sup> When the U.S. went ahead with the bombing halt anyway, Thieu failed to send a representative to Paris for several weeks, stalled the talks with procedural objections, and “made demands neither North Vietnam nor the United States could accept.”<sup>60</sup> Thieu’s efforts to disrupt the peace talks completely destroyed Johnson’s efforts to bring the conflict to a close; “By the time the procedural issues had been resolved, the Johnson administration was in its last days and any hopes for substantive negotiations had passed.”<sup>61</sup> Nixon’s electoral victory over Humphrey in November meant that the mantle of leadership concerning Vietnam would pass on to him, and he was prepared to tackle the problem. Having seen what the war had done to Lyndon Johnson, Nixon entered the White House determined that things would be very different for him.

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<sup>58</sup> Small, 527; Herring, 175; Morton A. Kaplan, et al., *Vietnam Settlement: Why 1973, Not 1969?*, (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973): 151. Thieu already knew that he would get a better deal from Nixon than from Humphrey, just as the Soviets and North Vietnamese preferred to deal with Humphrey over Nixon. This meant that Thieu already had sufficient incentives to drag his feet and hope for a Republican take-over of the White House in November.

<sup>59</sup> Small, 527.

<sup>60</sup> Herring, 175.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Nixon, the Madman Theory, and Vietnamization,**

It is clear that Nixon took office intent on ending the war: "I'm not going to end up like LBJ, holed up in the White House afraid to show my face on the street. I'm going to stop that war. Fast."<sup>62</sup> The exact timetable Nixon had under consideration is difficult to discern, but there is strong evidence to conclude that he greatly overestimated his chances of being able to end the war quickly: He told Michigan Congressman Donald Reigle that "he thought he could end the war six months after taking office," and H.R. Haldeman, one of Nixon's top aides, has also said that, "[Nixon] was absolutely convinced he would end it in his first year."<sup>63</sup>

Part of the reason for Nixon's overconfidence is because he strongly believed that he could capitalize on his reputation as an ardent anti-communist and pursue a strategy very similar to the one Eisenhower did in ending the Korean War where he threatened to use nuclear weapons if the Chinese did not agree to an immediate cease-fire.<sup>64</sup> Nixon called this strategy the "Madman Theory" and its central component was that he appeared to be irrational and obsessed with ending the war at any cost. According to Haldemann, Nixon told him that:

I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, 'for god's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.<sup>65</sup>

Kissinger would play an integral role in this process because, as one author has put it, the Madman Theory was essentially a game of good cop/bad cop between the two of them

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<sup>62</sup> Anderson, ed., 158

<sup>63</sup> Anderson, ed., 130; Kimball, (2004): 54.

<sup>64</sup> Kimball, (2004): 55.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

and the North Vietnamese.<sup>66</sup> In addition to pressuring the North Vietnamese, though, Nixon and Kissinger also believed that they could link détente with both China and the Soviet Union to their efforts to pressure Hanoi to accept the negotiated settlement to the war that the U.S. was offering.<sup>67</sup> They were confident that a combination of these two strategies was guaranteed to succeed.

Nixon recognized that this strategy could be undermined by domestic opposition to the war at home. He knew that some of the actions he needed to take in Vietnam in order to fit the madman profile (i.e. the bombing and invasions of Cambodia and Laos, the bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, and the mining of the harbor) could bring severe criticism which would damage the credibility of his attempts to negotiate from a position of strength. In order to counter this, the Nixon Administration began their efforts to silence war critics immediately upon taking office. Nixon hoped to be able to silence the majority of mainstream criticism by immediately scaling back the number of troops deployed to the region, and shifting the military burden more onto the ARVN. This Vietnamization process would also enable him to eventually phase out the draft.<sup>68</sup>

Withdrawal of US troops and phasing out the draft was largely successful against mainstream war critics, but he also utilized a range of more questionable behavior and techniques against the more established anti-war movement and media that would later get them into trouble during the Watergate scandal. This included: illegal wiretapping, misuse of the CIA and FBI as well as using private groups created from within the executive to perform other acts of domestic surveillance and espionage, intimidating the

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<sup>66</sup> Anderson, ed., 159.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>68</sup> Anderson, ed., 144-145.



media with FCC monitoring, antitrust actions, IRS investigations, and favoring pro-administration editors and journalists.<sup>69</sup>

While their efforts were largely successful in dampening the public reaction to perceived escalations, they did not eliminate them entirely. The Kent State massacre on May 4, 1970 is one of the most well-known tragedies of the era, and that student protest was a direct response to the public disclosure that US forces had invaded Cambodia.<sup>70</sup> This incident sparked even larger protests, and as US actions failed to force the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table and the war continued to drag on, the Nixon Administration found itself in an increasingly difficult spot. By January of 1971, the policy option preferred by the majority of Americans was one of withdrawal.<sup>71</sup> It is no wonder, then, that with its original plan to end the war failing to meet their expectations and the next election a little less than 2 years away, the Nixon White House opted for a change in goals and strategy.

Although it was not adopted as a private policy goal until late December, 1970 and early 1971, the strategy that was later referred to as the “decent interval” or “healthy interval” solution to the war actually originated as one of the three options in a RAND corporation report that Kissinger had commissioned immediately after Nixon was elected in 1968. It comprised the views of a significant minority group of dissenters within various government agencies who believed that the U.S. position was untenable and that they should try to achieve a compromise negotiated settlement to end the war. Two of the most notable recommendations to achieve this were the creation of a tripartite

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<sup>69</sup> Anderson, ed., 141; Keith W. Olson, *Watergate: The Presidential Scandal that Shook America*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003) 13.

<sup>70</sup> Kimball, (1998): 215-216.

<sup>71</sup> Lunch & Sperlich, 26.

electoral commission in South Vietnam, and a separation of the political from the military settlement. This would allow the U.S. to achieve an honorable exit without being entangled in the internal political struggle to determine the fate of Vietnam.<sup>72</sup> The “decent interval” part of the name “referred to a scenario in which the period between America’s withdrawal from Indochina and the Saigon government’s possible defeat would be long enough that when the fall came—if it came—it would *not* appear that Nixon’s policies had been responsible for South Vietnam’s collapse.”<sup>73</sup> In order to pursue this new objective, Kissinger set out in a different direction and began making serious political concessions in 1971 and 1972.

#### **Kissinger and Serious Negotiations: May 31, 1971 – January 27, 1973**

President Nixon had set the initial U.S. bargaining position for both the public and secret negotiations in a speech on Oct. 7, 1970. The main provisions were for an Indochina wide cease-fire, complete withdrawals of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces from the South, release of American POWs, and an Indochina wide peace conference. For its part, Hanoi was basically demanding an unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces and the removal of the Thieu regime in the South.<sup>74</sup> As a result of such drastically divergent negotiating positions, “no visible progress was achieved in either forum for nearly two years.”<sup>75</sup> In describing the inability of the two sides to successfully negotiate during that time, one analyst observed that the negotiations were never really that serious. The uncompromising pursuit of mutually unacceptable positions was unrealistic because

<sup>72</sup> Kimball, (1998): 93.

<sup>73</sup> Kimball, (2004): 27-28.

<sup>74</sup> Szulc, 25

<sup>75</sup> Szulc, 25.

“both sides were demanding the fruits of military victory without having achieved that victory.”<sup>76</sup>

However, after suffering some serious domestic political setbacks in early 1971 such as continued war protests, the conviction in a military court of First Lieutenant William Calley Jr. for his part in the My Lai massacre, the initial publication of the Pentagon Papers by the *New York Times*, as well as the poor performance of the ARVN in their first major offensive against the NVA from February 8 to March 24, Nixon’s public approval rating began to decline. In response, Nixon and Kissinger put together a 7-point plan on May 31<sup>st</sup> that hinted that the U.S. might be willing to drop its insistence that the North Vietnamese remove their troops from the South. While that offer was not explicit, Kissinger considered this to be “the first real negotiations since the process began.”<sup>77</sup> The North Vietnamese responded with a 9-point counterproposal that was rejected by the U.S., and as a result, both sides shied away from any more serious efforts to negotiate with the U.S. doing what it could to shore up support for Thieu in the upcoming October election in South Vietnam, and the North Vietnamese preparing for the massive offensive they had planned for the Spring of 1972.<sup>78</sup>

The real political breakthrough that got the negotiations back on track occurred after North Vietnam launched that massive spring offensive on March 30, 1972. At a secret summit meeting in Moscow from April 20-24, Kissinger conveyed to the Soviets the position that the U.S. would drop its insistence on the removal of North Vietnamese

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<sup>76</sup> Kaplan, et al., 37.

<sup>77</sup> Anderson, ed., 165.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 166-168. Some of the things the U.S. did to influence the election in South Vietnam was to have the CIA work with Thieu in bribing the legislature to disqualify Nguyen Cao Ky from running, as well as offering another candidate, Duong Van Minh, \$3 million dollars to “stay in the rigged race and provide it with a veneer of legitimacy.” He denied the offer and withdrew one month before the election. (166). For more on the breakdown of negotiations after May, 31 and the shoring up of Thieu also see Szulc, 29-32.

troops from South Vietnam if they removed the estimated 30,000 to 40,000 that had entered since the offensive began. This deal was conditional on the fact that North Vietnam also dropped its insistence on the removal of the Thieu regime before any agreement was signed. While the U.S. had hinted that it might be willing to allow North Vietnamese forces to stay in the South in the May 31<sup>st</sup> proposal, and again in October of 1971, this was the first time that the offer was made explicit, and Kissinger gave the Russians the task of delivering the message to the North Vietnamese.<sup>79</sup>

On May 3, Kissinger had his first secret meeting with the North Vietnamese in almost 8 months, but they were in no mood to negotiate after the success of the Spring Offensive. Recognizing the need to do something to roll back their advances and prevent a total collapse of the ARVN as well as give the North an incentive to come back to negotiate, Nixon authorized the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong as well as the mining of the harbor. Nixon went through with this rather risky plan on May 8, despite the warning from his top advisors that there was a 50% chance that the Soviets would cancel the upcoming May 24-30 summit meeting in response. The Soviets did not cancel the summit, however, and in subsequent talks between Kissinger and the Soviets on May 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, he softened the U.S. negotiating stance even more: He indicated that the U.S. might be willing to drop its insistence on no bombing halts until all POWs had been returned, and that the U.S. could support the creation of a tripartite electoral commission. These provisions were contrary to the public negotiating stance of the U.S., but also formed "the foundations for what would become the ultimate settlement."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Szulc, 36-37.

<sup>80</sup> Szulc, 38-43. The quote at the end of the paragraph is taken from p. 43. Once again, Kissinger entrusted the Soviets with the task of delivering the message to Hanoi.

In mid-June Kissinger went to China to solicit Chinese support in ending the conflict, and he also expressed interest in meeting with Hanoi before the Democratic National Convention. Although he was told by Chou En-lai that "China would not press Hanoi one way or another," in July Chairman Mao told France's Foreign Minister that "he advised Madame Binh, the Vietcong Foreign Minister, to desist from making demands for Thieu's resignation as a precondition."<sup>81</sup> Kissinger had another secret meeting with the North on July 19<sup>th</sup> that was uneventful because both sides simply "rehashed their positions...but, importantly, the two sides agreed to keep in touch."<sup>82</sup>

Further meetings on August 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> made more progress towards an agreement on a tripartite electoral commission. Alexander Haig and Ellsworth Bunker, the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, were both tasked with selling the idea to President Thieu, but he rejected them outright. Frustrated by this lack of cooperation, Kissinger asked for Nixon's approval to continue negotiating the terms of the tripartite commission with the North on September 15<sup>th</sup> despite Thieu's rejection of the idea. Arguing that the President could not afford a breakdown in the peace talks seven weeks before the election Kissinger received the go-ahead from the President. On September 26, 1972 Kissinger formally presented the tripartite electoral commission idea in Paris and remarked to his staff that "there was a good chance that the 'Vietnam Cancer' could be removed before the November Elections," which was a personal relief to him because he felt that "it endangered détente."<sup>83</sup>

The breakthrough with the North came on October 8<sup>th</sup> when the North Vietnamese presented their first comprehensive peace proposal of the entire war instead

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<sup>81</sup> Szulc, 44,45.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 48-52

of a list of demands. The document not only dropped their previous position on Thieu's removal, but also agreed to separate the political from the military settlement. Although several details remained to be negotiated, the two sides reached an agreement "in principle" on October 11<sup>th</sup>. Kissinger still had to get the approval of Presidents Nixon and Thieu, but the North Vietnamese adamantly insisted that the agreement be signed on October 31.<sup>8</sup> Kissinger was quite confident that this could be accomplished by that date but, while Nixon agreed that "the draft was basically acceptable" on October 12<sup>th</sup>, after an unsuccessful four days of trying to convince Thieu, Kissinger informed Nixon on October 23<sup>rd</sup> that the negotiations had hit a snag and that he would have to cancel his trip to Hanoi.<sup>84</sup>

In response to this, the North Vietnamese went public with the details of the agreement, forcing Kissinger to do some damage control and assert that the negotiations had not reached an impasse and declare that "peace is at hand" despite private reservations to the contrary. Thieu's rejection of the peace agreement was a major problem, but not an unfamiliar one. In a sense of tragic irony (or cosmic karma), the situation was almost exactly the same as the Johnson negotiations in 1968 when, with the support of Nixon, Thieu rejected the U.S. backed peace proposal right before the election. In reality, though, both Nixon and the North Vietnamese began backing away at this point. Nixon was getting criticism from hawks in the government that he was giving away too much, and as the ARVN launched a new offensive against the overextended NVA in early November the situation on the ground no longer appeared to favor Hanoi.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kissinger later recounted that they fought for that date "almost as maniacally as they fought the war." (Szulc, 53).

<sup>84</sup> Szulc, 53-57

<sup>85</sup> Anderson, ed., 171; Szulc, 59-60.

In the face of increasing reticence on the part of Hanoi to go through with the negotiations, on December 18<sup>th</sup> Nixon launched operation Linebacker II, also called the “Christmas Bombing,” aerial attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong that was “the largest and most violent sustained bombing of the war.”<sup>86</sup>

The bombing stopped on December 29<sup>th</sup>, the North Vietnamese agreed to resume the peace talks on January 7, and the negotiations were concluded on January 13, 1973.<sup>87</sup> The final peace treaty, which “was essentially the same as that reached in October,” was signed by all four members of the Paris peace talks on January 27, 1973.<sup>88</sup> More than four years after promising to end U.S. involvement in the war, Nixon finally reached an agreement to accomplish that goal. Even then, though, the future fate of Saigon remained uncertain. However, that uncertainty turned into concrete reality on April 30, 1975 with the dramatic and widely televised fall of Saigon.<sup>89</sup> The decent interval that Nixon and Kissinger sought turned out to be about two years and three months.

## CONCLUSIONS

In his article detailing the history of Kissinger’s efforts to end the war Tad Szulc made a very important observation:

It is remarkable—and instructive—to note the extremely close parallels between the negotiations of 1972 and the U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations of 1968

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<sup>86</sup> Szulc 61; Chad Parker, “American Bombing Strategy and Teaching the Vietnam War,” *OAH Magazine of History* (October, 2004): 61. The Christmas Bombing was perhaps the most controversial decision of the war. Nixon’s public approval dropped 11 points after the bombing, and his critics argue that because there was almost no difference between the October and January agreements, the bombings only intent was to “bribe Theiu into accepting the treaty” and “placat[e] right wing hawks in the United States.” (Anderson ed., 174, 175; see also Szulc, 67). Others have argued that the destruction of the PAVN was absolutely essential for the South Vietnam to survive long enough to achieve a decent interval.

<sup>87</sup> Anderson, ed., 174; Szulc 62-63.

<sup>88</sup> Anderson, ed., 176.

<sup>89</sup> Stephen W. Hook, and John Spanier, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II 15<sup>th</sup> ed.*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2000) 145.

concerning the cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam[...]the structure of the two negotiations was virtually identical, right down to the exact date on which the North Vietnamese demanded the agreement; each time, it was October 31[...]In both cases it would appear that the critical factor as far as timing was concerned was the impending Presidential election.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the several reasons why the Vietnam case is of an exceptional nature, it seems that the influence of the electoral cycle still had a profound effect on the content and timing of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. Even though Nixon entered the White House with significant foreign policy experience, he was still not immune from the overconfidence and grandiose visions of success that plague other first-term presidents. It is obvious that he greatly overestimated the effectiveness of the Madman Theory and as a result, he also greatly underestimated the time necessary to end the war in accordance with his goals of achieving “peace with honor.”

He also overestimated the willingness of the U.S.S.R and China to put serious pressure on Hanoi to settle the conflict. Although they both urged the North Vietnamese to accept a negotiated settlement, as well as facilitated communication and trust by delivering Kissinger’s messages and helping to convince Hanoi that the offers were genuine, throughout the entire conflict neither power cut off their arms shipments.<sup>91</sup> Hanoi was also working its own triangle diplomacy at that time, and neither the Soviet Union nor China felt that they could suspend shipments because it would bring into question their commitment to support their socialist ally.<sup>92</sup> As a result, Nixon’s desire to link détente with the PRC and U.S.S.R. to their assistance in ending the Vietnam War backfired to the point that in several instances the inability of the U.S. to end the war actually endangered détente.

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<sup>90</sup> Szulc, 68.

<sup>91</sup> Kaplan, et al., 57.

<sup>92</sup> Kimball, (2004): 69.



The inability to realize the ineffectiveness of his initial approach persisted through the second year of his term until Nixon began drastically softening his negotiating position in the third and fourth year, most notably after the Spring Offensive in 1972 when electoral pressures to end the war were mounting and the bargaining leverage afforded by an ever diminishing number of U.S. forces began weakening the realities on the ground.<sup>93</sup> In fact, in his rush to end the war before the election, he seemed to have gone too far, resulting in backpedaling on the October agreement. In order to avoid the perception that the U.S. was cutting and running, particularly after Thieu rejected the offer, "Nixon believed that politically he could not afford to sign the October treaty."<sup>94</sup>

So far, these developments are largely consistent with Quandt's generalizations, but the Vietnam case manifests its largest and most obvious departure from that model during the fourth year of the first term.<sup>95</sup> Quandt's model predicts that there would be no major effort at a big new foreign policy initiative because the incumbent would be too busy campaigning, and that "election years rarely witness great success in foreign policy."<sup>96</sup> This was clearly not the case with the withdrawal from Vietnam where almost all of the major negotiating breakthroughs came in 1972, but again here there are several mitigating circumstances at work. First of all, the war was not a new issue. It had been around since before Nixon was in the White House, and by that time it was simply much too big of an issue to be pushed off to the side and dealt with later; especially after he was elected in 1968 with the promise that he would end the war. Second, almost all of the

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<sup>93</sup> Anderson, ed., 145, 164. Although the Christmas Bombing is clear evidence that Nixon never gave up the Madman Theory completely, the many concessions that the U.S. gave up after the Spring offensive is a clear indicator of their acceptance of the 'decent interval' solution as the overall goal to end the war rather than the unrealistic policies they were pursuing at the beginning of his term.

<sup>94</sup> Anderson, ed., 171.

<sup>95</sup> While the generalities that Quandt discusses in each year of the first term do not always line up perfectly with Nixon's actions during his first term, the ordered sequence that Quandt discusses remains intact.

<sup>96</sup> Quandt, 835.

negotiating was done by Henry Kissinger which freed Nixon to actively campaign back home.

Furthermore Quandt himself recognizes that Nixon was the great exception to this rule. He was a master politician who understood very well that his skillful foreign policy success would help his reelection more than anything else; "In 1972 he brought the American involvement in Vietnam to an end, he traveled to China, and he signed the SALT I agreement in Moscow. All this took place in the space of several months and in an election year."<sup>97</sup> Although he fudged the date a little bit on the end of the Vietnam War, there is no mistaking the fourth quarter foreign policy blitz that Nixon pursued in 1972, and I don't think it is mere coincidence that Kissinger's two years of secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese was not made public until January 25<sup>th</sup> of that year.<sup>98</sup>

Consistent with the other literature, though, the causality of this cycling is impossible to determine. There is no doubt that throughout the process Nixon and Kissinger were responding to domestic electoral pressures, but the actions of both North Vietnam and the Thieu regime in South Vietnam also exhibit a great deal of sensitivity and awareness of the 4-year electoral cycle in American politics. That the North would launch the two most massive offenses of the entire war early in the election years of 1968 and 1972, and vehemently insist that the agreements be signed on October 31<sup>st</sup> indicates all too well that they knew that was the best time they had to achieve a negotiated settlement.<sup>14</sup> Thieu was also very aware of this and, consequently, rejected both peace

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Szulc, 24.

<sup>14</sup> The causality can also be argued from the opposite direction as well. It is possible that the timing of their 1972 offensive was a response to the U.S. troop withdrawals that were scheduled to be at their lowest levels

proposals handed to him by the U.S. right before the election in the hopes of locking them into another four years of support. That strategy worked in 1968, but in 1972 with strong public opinion supporting an unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces, and a Congress that was increasingly willing to cut off funding for the war, it was clear that the U.S. had had enough of the war in Vietnam and that Nixon could no longer afford to maintain any U.S. presence there. Finally, the pressure that the Soviet Union put on Hanoi in 1968 in the hopes of improving Humphrey's chances against Nixon is further evidence that causation can work both ways where electoral cycles are concerned.

I began this study with the research question "why did it take over 4 years to end American involvement in the Vietnam War when the public was opposed to it in 1968?" because it was a rather puzzling to me that the U.S. stayed in the war that long. If the majority of the public felt that U.S. involvement was a mistake by late 1967, then why didn't the war end in 1968 or 1969? In February, 1973 the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy hosted a televised debate involving two academics, two policymakers, and two journalists that addressed this very question. That debate was transcribed into a book titled "Vietnam Settlement: Why 1973, Not 1969?" and, at the risk of grossly oversimplifying the arguments presented there, the core of everyone's arguments seemed to revolve around a few main points:

Those who argued that a settlement was only possible in 1973 did so with the assumption that the U.S. was obligated to fulfill its commitment in the region, and that, because of Vietnamization, the Thieu regime now had a reasonable chance to preserve its independence from North Vietnamese aggression. Not one of the proponents said that

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in over 6 years by the November election. Regardless of which way the issue is examined, though, the election cycle is still the central motivational mechanism.

this possibility of preservation was guaranteed, but that it would have been absolutely impossible in 1968 and 1969 when the U.S. was still bearing almost all of the military responsibility. Proponents of the 1969 side of the argument—while admitting that it is impossible to know for certain if an agreement could have been reached—assert that negotiations were never seriously pursued in 1968, 1969, or 1970 and that they should have been.<sup>99</sup> They also argued that the repeatedly poor performance of the ARVN had proven the failures of Vietnamization, and that there was a good possibility that the South Vietnamese government would fall anyway making the costs incurred in the previous 4 years incredibly high compared to any benefits gained from sticking it out.<sup>100</sup>

These arguments constituted a powerful argument at the time, and with the benefit of hindsight that 30 years have given us, we are able to put everything into perspective more easily. It is indeed true that Saigon fell shortly after the U.S. withdrawal and, furthermore, we now know that Kissinger and Nixon negotiated the agreement with the knowledge that the U.S. would probably only get a “decent interval” for all its efforts.<sup>101</sup> Looking back on the results, it now appears even more illogical that the U.S. did not at least try to put forth a good-faith effort to achieve a negotiated settlement along the lines of the 1973 agreement back in 1969. However, if the situation is examined from a perspective that focuses on the structural and institutional effects of the U.S. election cycle, it certainly seems that the events and the timing of the withdrawal did indeed follow their own sort of inner logic. Furthermore, the fact that U.S. involvement seemed

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<sup>99</sup> Another one of their central arguments was that the U.S. had no strategic interest in the region.

<sup>100</sup> Morton A. Kaplan, et al., *Vietnam Settlement: Why 1973, Not 1969?* (Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973).

<sup>101</sup> <sup>φ</sup> In terms of the electoral cycle, it should be noted that the 2 years of the decent interval that was eventually achieved would put that fall toward the middle of the next presidential election cycle.

to go on longer than it should have in retrospect seems to lend at the very least circumstantial evidence to support Gaubatz pessimistic claim that election cycles could possibly lead to more severe war in the long run.

Previous scholarship on cycling has generally omitted the influence of the U.S. electoral cycle on foreign policy and war, particularly concerning the resolution of conflicts once they have already begun. This omission is not surprising considering the widely accepted fact that foreign policy generally has little or no effect on the outcome of Presidential elections. However, on the rare occasions where international crises such as war force foreign policy concerns to the forefront, it would be wise to examine the broader effects of cycles, particularly when it comes to the effects of the election cycle on conflict-resolution.

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