THE ESSENTIAL DOMINO: AMERICAN POLITICS AND VIETNAM

By Leslie H. Gelb

AS Henry Kissinger has written, public support is "the acid test of a foreign policy." For a President to be successful in maintaining his nation's security he needs to believe, and others need to believe, that he has solid support at home. It was President Johnson's judgment that if the United States permitted the fall of Vietnam to communism, American politics would turn ugly and inward and the world would be a less safe place in which to live. Later, President Nixon would declare: "The right way out of Vietnam is crucial to our changing role in the world, and the peace in the world." In order to gain support for these judgments and the objectives in Vietnam which flowed from them, our Presidents have had to weave together the steel-of-war strategy with the strands of domestic politics.

Neither the Americans nor the Vietnamese communists had good odds for a traditional military victory in Vietnam. Given the mutual will to continue the war and self-imposed American restraint in the use of force, stalemate was the most likely outcome.

This common perception had a critical impact on the strategies of both sides. It meant that the "winner" would be the one whose will to persist gave out first. Hanoi's will, because of the nature of its government, society and economy, and because the North Vietnamese were fighting in and for their country, was firmer by far than Washington's. Washington's will, because of the vagaries of American politics and the widespread dislike of in-terminable and indeterminate Asian land wars, presented an inviting target. For both sides, then, U.S. domestic politics—public support and opposition to the war—was to be the key stress point.

American public opinion was the essential domino. Our leaders knew it. Hanoi's leaders knew it. Each geared its strategy—both the rhetoric and the conduct of the war—to this fact.

Hanoi adopted what seems to have been a two-pronged strategy to cause U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam by playing on American domestic politics. The first aim was to try to convince Americans that unless U.S. forces withdrew, the killing of Amer-
icans would never end. Hanoi's leaders seemed to have hoped that as the war dragged on, Americans would come to see a hopeless portrait of corrupt Saigon leadership and an ineffective South Vietnamese army. At the same time, Hanoi would seek to demonstrate a willingness to match force with force at ever-increasing levels. If the American public, or significant minorities of the public, could be convinced of these factors, continuation of the war by the U.S. leadership would become bad politics.

The second aim of Hanoi's strategy, as I imagine it, was to provide a face-saving exit for American leaders. It would not be enough—indeed, it might be dangerous from Hanoi's view—to leave official Washington in a situation where withdrawal could only mean defeat. That might lead to unlimited escalation of the war. American leaders had to be assured that withdrawal could take place without severe withdrawal symptoms. From time to time, Hanoi offered settlement packages that were not without appeal. These proposals, however, did not appeal to our leaders because they were not looking for a face-saving way out, but for a noncommunist South Vietnam.

Perhaps the surest sign that Hanoi's strategy made sense was that our own leaders also believed that American politics was the Achilles heel.

Officials rarely write memos with any explicit reference to domestic affairs, and seldom even talk about them except to friends and newspapermen off-the-record. The unfounded but nevertheless potent myth about politics stopping at the water's edge creates great pressure to keep one's mouth shut, to think and speak of foreign affairs as if it were something sacred. After all, foreign policy deals with the security of our nation, and this is no subject for narrow political advantage. President Truman once told a State Department official who dared to speak directly on the subject that he should not tell him about domestic problems, but about "what is right."

The public literature emanating from the inner circles is nearly silent on the connections between foreign policy and domestic politics. And officials are almost as wary of talking about domestic politics as they are of writing on the subject. We get glimpses of those few instances in odd ways. For example, the point of Kenneth O'Donnell's article in the August 7, 1970 issue of *Life* is to assure us that President Kennedy was waiting for the right moment to pull out of Vietnam. That right moment for
President Kennedy, O'Donnell declares, was after the 1964 presidential elections when the issue could no longer be used against him. Or, we hear from close associates of President Johnson that on a few occasions he would guardedly talk on the subject. Later, in his memoirs, he wrote:

... I knew our people well enough to realize that if we walked away from Vietnam and let Southeast Asia fall, there would follow a divisive and destructive debate in our country.... A divisive debate about “who lost Vietnam” would be, in my judgment, even more destructive to our national life than the argument over China had been.... Our allies... throughout the world would conclude that our word was worth little or nothing... [Moscow and Peking] could not resist the opportunity to expand their control into the vacuum of power.... With Moscow and Peking... moving forward, we would return to a world role to prevent their full takeover of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East—after they had committed themselves.

Few will deny that what our Presidents chose to do or chose not to do in Vietnam was very much tied to domestic politics. Yet, the myth is potent, and official silence on the subject prevails. Presidents suffer because the connections between foreign and domestic affairs, while talked about privately, are not treated in a systematic way. So far as one knows, critical assumptions about what will or will not garner popular support are left unchallenged. For example, nowhere in the executive branch of government did one feel free to do a paper which said “Here is how the right-wing could be contained if we accepted Hanoi’s best offer.” In this way the President is supposed to “keep his options open.” As was the case in Vietnam, however, he may succeed in trapping himself. Another cost of this silence is that analysts trying to piece decisions back together for history are left without evidence.

Academicians and public-opinion experts have helped to perpetuate the myth in their own way by “demonstrating” that foreign policy simply is not a salient issue to the voter and that whatever the President says and does goes. Presidents have, I think, known better. Citizens may not single out national security affairs as the basis for their votes—although war and peace issues often are so mentioned—but the security area inevitably plays an important part in determining their overall impression of how the President is doing his job. Moreover, communications leaders and “élites” judge the President’s performance with regard to national security, and the mood which they convey to the public affects public appraisals of the man in the White House.
On the surface, it seemed that our Presidents should have no special problems about U.S. goals in Vietnam. While no one presumed that Asian land wars were popular, there was evident general acceptance of U.S. worldwide security responsibilities among the public, press and Congress. And yet, problems did arise.

One problem grew out of how to talk publicly about U.S. goals without tying our hands in Saigon and in negotiations. In National Security Action Memorandum 52 of May 11, 1961, President Kennedy approved the objective of "prevent(ing) Communist domination of South Vietnam." In NSAM 288 of March 17, 1964, President Johnson's objective was defined as "an independent non-Communist South Vietnam." But our leaders did not choose to use this language when talking to the American people. Public statements of goals came closest to the private formulations in phrases like "stopping aggression." The classified language of the NSAMs was apparently deemed too negative and not in line with the American tradition. Something positive and more in keeping with American mythology was required, and so the public goals became "self-determination," "free elections," and "permitting the South Vietnamese freely to determine their own future."

As a practical matter, self-determination language tended to commit Washington to the existing Saigon government—perhaps to a greater extent than even those who backed that régime desired. Washington's representatives in Saigon made much of the necessity and virtue of holding elections. Elections, so Saigon's leaders were told, would help to sell the war to the American people. When Saigon's leaders obliged, held elections and predictably won them, Washington found itself confronted with a government that had become "legitimate." And this legitimacy conferred upon the winners increased bargaining strength. The Thieu and Ky power groups were thereby better able to resist pressures for reform. Legitimacy in American eyes also invested their régime with an enhanced voice in negotiations. As an ally, Saigon had the right to consultations. As a legitimate government, Saigon expected and received the right to approve the beginning of negotiations and the terms of settlement. As a consequence, attaining a settlement that did not ensure the perpetuation of the incumbent Saigon régime became highly improbable.
Although it must be said that many Washington policy-makers were not troubled by these problems, there were also many who both shared official aims and wanted reform and flexibility. These people found themselves without leverage.

A second problem was how to talk publicly about goals without unleashing pressures for the unlimited use of force. While the objective of a noncommunist South Vietnam was specific, our leaders did not want to employ maximum force to achieve it. President Johnson prohibited use of U.S. ground and air forces in Cambodia, ground forces in Laos, invasion of North Vietnam; he also restricted air power in the North. He did not want to risk a wider war and he sought to minimize civilian casualties. But unlimited ends, in time, are bound to lead to a call for unlimited means and the possibility always existed that popular frustration or passion would bring about irresistible demands to make means consistent with ends.

A third problem developed in 1966 as the ends of the war themselves came into question. From this point on, President Johnson was faced with a delicate choice. On the one hand, he could have chosen to wave the “bloody flag” and infuse the war with popular emotion. This, in the President’s estimation, would have lit right-wing fires to win the war, thus eroding barriers against the all-out use of force. And once these barriers were torn down, so Lyndon Johnson apparently reasoned, right-wing demands could not be controlled. Such a strategy also would have been incompatible with the President’s political style, which emphasized consensus above all. On the other hand, he could run parallel to this line by challenging his critics with innuendo and with the argument that fighting locally in Vietnam was preventing the outbreak of large-scale aggression elsewhere. President Johnson picked this course. Instead of insinuating that his critics were traitors or communists, he called them “nervous Nellies” and “prophets of gloom and doom.” Instead of holding parades down Pennsylvania Avenue, he held award ceremonies in the Oval Office. As the war dragged on, however, none of this was sufficient to quell the growing opposition.

III

The fact that the war was dragging on related in part to the historical roots of the conflict in Vietnam and to the means which Presidents Kennedy and Johnson chose to fight it. Gradual esca-
lation was the chosen strategy for fighting the war. This fitted in intellectually with the Kennedy-Johnson military doctrine of flexible and controlled response. In Vietnam, it meant a “slow squeeze” bombing policy for North Vietnam and an attrition policy for South Vietnam. Decisions about means, however, were based upon judgments about both the least risky way to fight the war and the best way to maintain public support at home.

The constraints which domestic politics imposed on the air war against the North were aimed at minimizing civilian casualties and the loss of pilots. This meant avoiding key population centers and other highly defended areas. Such constraints were reinforced by diplomatic judgments which sought to minimize the risk of confrontation with China and Russia. (All this, however, did not prevent the bombing of most fixed targets and the dropping of more explosive tonnage than in all World War II.) The strategic decision to bomb in a gradual but rising pattern (Rolling Thunder) rather than a simultaneous whole system campaign (the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS] eight-week plan) was probably made on diplomatic grounds.

It is also true that the bombing itself became a salient political issue as pressures to begin negotiations increased. While American right-wing and governmental leaders kept insisting on major concessions for stopping the bombing, doves argued that it should be stopped only in return for Hanoi’s promise to begin talks. Whether and on what terms to stop the bombing emerged as the most symbolic political issue of the war in 1967 and 1968.

Domestic politics imposed a dominant constraint on the size and development of the ground war in the South as well. As many U.S. servicemen as possible could be sent to Vietnam as quickly as possible for short terms of service, subject only to a presidential prohibition against calling up the Reserves. In accordance with established military procedure, U.S. force posture was designed to expand by means of Active Reserve and National Guard call-ups. But to do so would be to disrupt lives of many American families. Because the President did not want to incur this political liability, he chose to deplete and weaken U.S. forces stationed in Europe and America and to increase draft calls. The burden fell on the young and the poor; for this and other reasons, political opposition to the war tended to congeal around these groups and their legislative allies. Not until March 1968 did the JCS and their political allies outside the govern-
ment succeed in forcing the President’s hand on the Reserve issue, and then he acceded only to a 25,000-man call-up.

If, after 1965, force decisions called for the maximum possible, given domestic and diplomatic constraints, domestic politics dictated the minimum necessary disruption of American life. This was the case not only with respect to Reserve call-ups, but with respect to the economics of the war. President Johnson wanted guns and butter. He did not inform his chief economic advisers of the fall 1965 decision to achieve a force level of 175,000 men. He resisted pressures for increased taxes throughout 1966. Finally, in late 1967, he asked for a ten percent surtax, but this fell far short of paying for the mounting costs of the war. Moreover, he refused to let congressional leaders call it a war tax. Short-run prosperity was purchased at the price of long-run inflation.

Domestic politics also impelled the leaders of the Johnson administration to become fire-fighters. Actions in Vietnam, if not dictated, were often shaped by daily criticisms at home. The many false starts on the pacification program came in response to charges by legislators and journalists that Johnson was not doing enough about “the other war.” If legislators insisted that Saigon’s forces do more of the fighting, willy-nilly, the size of those forces was increased. No matter that the issue was quality, not size. Size could be fixed faster. And so it was with many other issues as the Administration sought vainly to paper over critical television reports and front-page news stories with short-run solutions.

But short-term fixes and a policy of not demanding domestic sacrifices were not enough. The President also had to manipulate time horizons carefully. Just as Hanoi tried to portray the war as never-ending, Washington had to feed the impression of near-term winnability. The public would not stand for gradualism if it promised only open-ended fighting with continued U.S. fatalities. Thus was born the policy of controlled optimism. Pressure from the White House was felt throughout the government, into the field, down to the very bottom of the command structure. Show progress politically and militarily! Visitors to the Oval Office would be treated to a look at President Johnson pulling Ambassador Lodge’s or Ambassador Bunker’s “weekly nodis” cable out of his inside jacket pocket and hearing how things were getting better. Pointed questions about when the war would end
were side-stepped if possible. Only if answers had to be provided would the truth be admitted. (Fortunately for Administration strategy, the news media made little of these isolated revelations.) Admitting to the public that the war would take time, officials seemed to have reasoned, would play into Hanoi’s hands. So, whenever possible, the Administration assured the public of ultimate success. Some officials were allowed to climb out on a limb and predict imminent victory. Others volunteered their genuine optimism. The net effect was to lead the public to think that the end was near. But the dilemma of this strategy could not have been lost on our leaders. Optimism without results would only work for so long; after that, it would produce the credibility gap.

IV

Behind the fall into the credibility gap and beyond the President’s domestic strategy, there resided a vital and unquestioned assumption—that America was basically hawkish and that the forces of conservatism, if not reaction, would always prevail over the liberal groups. This assumption probably underpinned President Kennedy’s remarks to Kenneth O'Donnell and Senator Mansfield in 1963 that he was waiting until after the next election before changing direction in Vietnam. In the ensuing years, President Johnson occasionally lectured reporters and his own aides on the politics of the war. He is supposed to have told them that they were worrying about the wrong domestic opposition. They were worrying, so the stories ran, about the liberals and the doves, but the real problem was the conservatives. They had “done in” President Truman over China. They still held the reins of power in the congressional committees. They were the difference between the success and failure of Great Society legislation. And waiting in the wings was latent right-wing McCarthyism, threatening to strike at all that liberals held dear if a President of the United States ever lost a war. Although none of these stories can be taken at face value, the point is there—the nation, in the opinion of our leaders, would not tolerate the loss of a “free” country to communism.

Were Presidents Kennedy and Johnson correct in their estimation of American politics as essentially conservative? Was the strategy of gradualism consistent with these assumptions? And was this strategy the best way of convincing Hanoi that they had the public support necessary to stay the course in Vietnam?
The evidence on the first question is mixed. For the assumption that U.S. politics were essentially conservative, we have the facts that: professional politicians widely held this view; conservatives did influence the Congress disproportionately to their numbers; President Truman did suffer because of China and Korea; public opinion polls from 1954 until a year ago did show a majority of Americans against losing South Vietnam to communism. Against this assumption, we have the facts that: the alternatives in many of the Vietnam polls (unilateral withdrawal or annihilation of the enemy) gave the respondent little choice; other polls showed a majority against losing to communism, but also showed a majority against using U.S. forces to accomplish this; polls on foreign affairs strongly tend to follow the presidential lead; the President's overall popularity was dropping in the polls; and the majority of Americans eventually did turn against the war, or at least against fighting at any sizable cost in lives and dollars.

Perhaps the answer is that our Presidents were right about the conservative thrust of American politics until March 1968, and that it took the experience of the Vietnam War to deflate public passions about losing countries to communism.

The answer to the second question—did the strategy of gradualism fit the assumption of hawkishness?—is yes, but more than that as well. On the surface, the strategy was directed toward the right wing. As the war went on, gradualism did become the functional equivalent of escalation. And escalation, in turn, was supposed to meet not only the increasing military needs in the field, but appease the hawks at home as well. Yet, the right wing was not satisfied. They always wanted much more than Johnson would give. And the President must have known that this would be the case, for his strategy was much more complex than a simple effort to placate the Right.

On a deeper level, gradualism was designed to control both the Right and the Left. With respect to the management of the domestic aspects of the war, it rested implicitly on the belief that asking the public to swallow the war whole would backfire, leading to irresistible pressures either to win or get out. It was the product of the old consensus game. The key was to stake out the middle ground. Everyone was to be given the illusion that the war would soon be over. The Right was to be given escalation. The Left was to be given occasional peace overtures. The middle
would not be asked to pay for the war. The Right would be assured that South Vietnam would not be lost. The Left would be frightened into submission by the specter of McCarthyism. But the key to the whole strategy was phasing.

The right-wing reaction was the ultimate nightmare. This was to be forestalled and the hawks controlled by not losing, by escalating and by promising victory. But given these parameters the immediate problem was to keep the doves, the liberals and the Left in line.

In the short run, President Johnson was more wary of the Left than of the Right. The McCarthyite nightmare might come to pass if the United States lost Vietnam. But it could happen only if the doves and the Left first gained the ascendancy, only if their opposition to the war spread to the middle and across to the Right. The Left and the liberals were the only ones who would openly press for withdrawal, for "losing." The Right would be unhappy, disgruntled, but they would never press the case for withdrawal to the public. The Left and the doves would—and, to a large extent, they prevailed.

All this raises the final question—was the President's strategy the best way of making Hanoi believe that U.S. Presidents would be able to continue the war until North Vietnam quit? My guess is that Hanoi's leaders not only were confident they could outlast gradualism in the field, but also were aware that such a strategy was a sign of the domestic political weakness of our Presidents.

The "slow-squeeze" approach showed Hanoi two things. On the one hand, it signaled that America could always do more militarily, while on the other, it revealed that the President would not do all that was necessary to win. A step-by-step strategy of threat can spring either from conviction or endemic weakness. U.S. policy toward Vietnam sprang from both. Manipulation by force or "compellence" had great appeal as a war strategy. But with each passing year of war the domestic political position of the President grew weaker.

Over time, the use of threats could not hide the President's fear that the fulfillment of his threats would be as costly to the United States as to North Vietnam. Going all-out to win apparently presented President Johnson with a double nightmare. If the public went along, it might portend war with China or Rus-
sia and a garrison state at home. If the public balked and wanted to "bug out," a McCarthyite reaction might ensue. And yet, going less than all-out would not be enough to win militarily—at least for many years. Only by accepting the risks of using maximum force and only by asking for domestic sacrifices could President Johnson have convinced Hanoi that the United States had crossed the threshold from a policy of questionable persistence to a war of no return, and that the American commitment to the war was irrevocable.

Thus, President Johnson's dilemma was stark. He would not try maximum force to win, because that would risk World War III. He would not replay Vietnam as China 1949, lose it and take the case to the public, because that would risk another round of McCarthyism. He would, as a last resort, replay Vietnam as Korea, hoping to outlast the other side and getting them to agree to stay on their side of the line—and risk wearing down his nation and countrymen.

President Johnson could look back at the Korean War and think it was bad, but not as bad as losing China. Harry Truman was roundly attacked for his self-restraint in fighting the Korean War—and yet, most Americans saw it as a courageous decision, and the history books were filled with praise for the beleagured President. China ruined President Truman. That is, it ruined him politically at that time—and its "loss" did ignite McCarthyism. But in the perspective of those very same history books, President Truman's decision to back away from the corrupt régime of Chiang and accept the tide of Mao was hailed as his most courageous and wisest hour. Lyndon Johnson did not see it that way. He would continue with middle-course actions in Vietnam, playing off Left and Right against one another at home. This strategy satisfied neither hawks nor doves; nor did it face down the North Vietnamese. The costs were staggering and are still incalculable—as are the costs of what might have been had the United States withdrawn or gone "all-out." And yet, President Johnson played his hand well enough to prevent the essential domino from falling and to persist in his policy.

VI

On January 25, 1972, President Nixon publicly revealed two peace proposals which Henry Kissinger had made secretly to Hanoi. One proposal dealt with an overall settlement, including
free elections "run by an independent body representing all political forces in South Vietnam," with international supervision, and with President Thieu stepping down from office prior to the vote. The second proposal, a military settlement carved out from the overall settlement, offered "a total withdrawal from South Vietnam of all U.S. forces and other foreign forces . . . within six months" provided that Hanoi agree to a phased return of U.S. prisoners of war and an Indochina-wide ceasefire "implement(ing) the principle that all armed forces of the countries of Indochina must remain within their national frontiers." Certain ambiguities in these proposals with respect to the powers of the electoral commission, the timing of the mutual withdrawal, future U.S. military aid to Saigon, and the phasing of a settlement, could indicate a new American flexibility. Still, the President did make clear that Hanoi had ignored and, in effect, had found both packages unacceptable. Hanoi has long opposed both elections controlled by other than a coalition government and a ceasefire-mutual withdrawal as too risky for its supporters in South Vietnam. Yet, Americans were bound to see the President's offers as reasonable, as a fair compromise. The President did manage to quiet Vietnam critics.

But the history of popular and political reaction to presidential peace overtures is filled with peaks and valleys. Both Johnson and Nixon have been able to gain renewed support in the short run only to lose it as their proposals proved non-negotiable and as the realities of the war again reassert themselves. As American troop levels decline, U.S. bargaining power evaporates. While a good case can be made that either of the "new" offers are in Hanoi's interest to accept, Hanoi seems likely to continue to reject them. Their aim appears to be not only withdrawal of the direct U.S. military presence, but the cessation of all military assistance to the Saigon régime, including naval and air support from beyond Indochina itself. At this time, the odds are they will settle for nothing less. The war will go on. And because the politics of the war are so fragile, it still behooves us to take a closer look at where we stand on Vietnam in America.

President Nixon has defined the U.S. objective in Vietnam in the same overall terms as did President Johnson. In his February 25, 1971, "Foreign Policy Report," President Nixon affirmed that with respect to both negotiations and Vietnamization, "We seek the opportunity for the South Vietnamese people to deter-
mine their own political future without outside interference.” With the invasion of Laos and with ever-receding possibilities for a negotiated settlement, the goal of Vietnamization was clarified to mean “providing a reasonable chance for the South Vietnamese to defend themselves.” Some were led to believe that this meant American forces would be totally withdrawn with the President hoping for a “decent interval” to elapse after that full withdrawal and before a communist takeover, so that our responsibility for the collapse of the Saigon government would be diminished. Others interpreted it as merely an indication that we are progressively turning over the fighting to the Saigon government. Still others saw it as the old objective of “an independent noncommunist South Vietnam” and as a way of preserving the Thieu régime. Dressed in new, moderate words because the war itself is being deeply questioned, the Nixon goal has occasioned more controversy than President Johnson’s. But it has also afforded the President the flexibility necessary for troop reductions.

By May 1972, the U.S. troop ceiling in Vietnam will be 69,000 men. And the President has promised another troop withdrawal announcement before that time. If Hanoi continues to reject the Nixon peace proposals, Vietnamization will result in the maintenance of two American residual forces as long as is necessary: one in Vietnam providing essentially logistical support, and the other (not counted as part of the force ceiling) in Thailand and on carriers off the Vietnamese shore providing air power. It certainly includes continuing economic and military assistance to Saigon at close to $2 billion per year as well.

The Vietnamization policy has produced a different domestic political problem than President Johnson’s policy of escalation. For President Johnson, the problem was how many troops could be put into Vietnam and profitably employed despite tenuous domestic support. For President Nixon, the problem has been how few troops can be withdrawn while maintaining a military balance in Vietnam but still assuaging the growing domestic opposition.

The issue for both Presidents was how to balance military risks in the field with conflicting political risks at home. President Johnson, who was not faced with serious domestic opposition to the war until March 1968, took few risks with the situation in Vietnam. After opinion turned against the war, President John-
son paid for this earlier decision with the loss of political strength. President Nixon has been assuming risks on both scales. He has taken chances with popular support by ordering the invasions of Cambodia and Laos and the “protective reaction” bombing strikes against North Vietnam. But he has also run risks in South Vietnam by reducing forces faster than the U.S. military deemed safe. The combination of moves has led to a reduction in American deaths and casualties (from over 500 per week in 1968 to about 50 per week at the beginning of 1972) and costs (from about $25 billion in 1968 to about $7 billion for 1972). The military situation has remained stable in Vietnam. For the President’s purposes, his strategy has been an apparent success at home and in Vietnam—at least in the wake of his January 25th speech.

On one level, President Nixon seems to have succeeded in neutralizing Vietnam as a prime issue in the forthcoming November election. As Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird said in a television interview: “The American people understand the difference between addition and subtraction.” U.S. troops have been withdrawn from Vietnam on schedule and even ahead of the schedule of presidential announcements. The winding down of the war and the steep drop in American casualties, according to this view, have defused the opposition.

VII

Political pundits have observed what was there for all of us to see—the general subsiding of active criticism of the President’s Vietnam policy. Such criticism no longer dominated the news media in the week preceding Nixon’s China visit. Because they seemed to illustrate the consequences of the President’s policy, the invasion of Cambodia and the subsequent tragedy at Kent State in 1970 probably represented the high point of opposition. But a curious phenomenon developed thereafter. While opposition to the war widened throughout the United States, the group of active critics seemingly narrowed to the political Left. More Americans were against the war, but fewer were doing anything about their beliefs. President Nixon reaped another political benefit from Cambodia—it defused right-wing criticism of war policy. Conservatives seemed gratified that this sanctuary finally had been invaded and pleased by the subsequent U.S. troop reductions. Unlike Johnson, Nixon did not have to worry about his right flank from this point on.
While questioning of the war by Congressmen and Senators became more widespread, and while amendments were passed which placed limits on U.S. involvement in Cambodia and Laos, the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment to set a deadline for withdrawal of all American forces failed by a larger vote in 1971 than in 1970. The political thrust of congressional opposition did not succeed in compelling the President to accept total withdrawal by a certain date in exchange for POWs only, but it did succeed in making escalation of the war more improbable and in hastening troop reductions. In other words, congressional opposition to the war increased, but legislators still showed themselves ready to follow the President’s lead as long as U.S. troops were being withdrawn, U.S. casualties were being reduced and as long as it looked as if Vietnamization was working.

On a different level, however, Vietnam seems to remain a major political issue. An October 1971 Gallup report ranked Vietnam right behind economic problems and well ahead of crime, race, poverty and other matters on the list of “the most important problems facing this country today.” One Harris poll showed that a majority of the American people believed that the war in Vietnam was immoral. A February 1971 Gallup poll found that 61 percent believed that the war was a mistake while only 28 percent felt that it was not. More revealing are the responses in Gallup’s August 1971 report where it was asked: “Suppose one candidate for Congress . . . said that he favors getting all U.S. armed forces out of Vietnam by July 1 of next year, and he is opposed by a candidate who says we must leave about 50,000 troops there to help the South Vietnamese. Other things being equal, which candidate would you prefer?” Sixty-one percent favored complete withdrawal, while 28 percent wanted to leave troops and 11 percent had no opinion. More importantly for President Nixon, Gallup claimed in his June 1971 report that the President faces a “giant-size credibility gap on Vietnam.” In response to the question: “Do you think that the Nixon administration is or is not telling the public all they should know about the Vietnam war?,” 24 percent said “is” and 67 percent said “is not.” And despite the President’s promises to end the war, 51 percent of the respondents believed that the war will last two years or more, or never end. At bottom, President Nixon’s credibility gap has the same sources as President Johnson’s—promises of an end to a war that does not end.
The results of these polls notwithstanding, critics of the war themselves seem to believe that the President has captured the electoral high ground. Most of these critics have switched the terms of their attack from arguing that the President's policy will not work to arguing that it is immoral and will only perpetuate the war and the consequences of the war. This tacit concession to the progress of Vietnamization and to the political success of the President's latest peace proposal at once evokes the true feelings of the critics and their political weakness. Their moral argument assumes a strong public interest in Vietnam, but in reality it seems to be that while the American public is increasingly opposed to the war, the majority really does not want to hear about it. Moreover, if the plight of people in Biafra and more recently in Bangladesh—to say nothing of the My Lai massacres—did not touch the moral sensitivity of even a fraction of Americans, it is doubtful that the specter of Vietnamese killing Vietnamese would stir the national conscience either. As long as fewer Americans are in Vietnam, fewer Americans are being killed and the cost of the war is being reduced, opposition to the President's policy will be unlikely to change that policy.

All of these political calculations are based on the assumption that the situation in Vietnam in the fall of 1972 will not be appreciably different from what it is early this spring. What would happen politically in the United States if the situation were deteriorating in one way or another? One scenario would have the North Vietnamese stepping up their military attacks, defeating the Saigon government forces, and on the verge of nullifying Vietnamization. Such an eventuality might lead many Americans to believe that four years of Nixon's policy had been for naught, that essentially the United States was back to where it was in 1965. It is unlikely, however, that Vietnamization will prove to be such an immediate failure. The North Vietnamese forces are weaker and the Saigon forces stronger than most critics had predicted they would be a year or three years ago. Therefore, the kind of collapse posited in this scenario is highly improbable. But should it come to pass, latent opposition to the war would be rekindled and the President would be in a very difficult position at home.

A second scenario would have the North Vietnamese launching countrywide offensives with spotty victories, and the United States in retaliation carrying out a continuing program of air
strikes against population and population-related targets in North Vietnam. This scenario seems more likely than the first. President Nixon has promised on many occasions to take “decisive action” in the event Hanoi increases the tempo of fighting in the South, and he has on a number of occasions carried out that threat. While it is true that past congressional, media and popular reactions to these “protective-reaction” bombing raids against North Vietnam have not been widespread, the image of U.S. planes hitting new targets in North Vietnam right before election time would remind the American people that the war was still going on. Latent opposition to the war would again emerge, to the probable disadvantage of the President.

If the war heats up in the summer and fall, it will be a political issue in the November elections. And it will be a bitter issue. Neither Republicans nor Democrats will want for superlative and invective. But no matter who is elected President in 1972, Vietnam will continue to take its toll on American society. If President Nixon is reelected and the war grinds on indeterminately, the youth and the intellectuals of our nation will become ever more alienated. This is not a large group of people, but they are precious to the national conscience. If a Democrat is elected who is prepared to meet all of Hanoi’s demands, end the war and not provide the Saigon government with any assistance whatever, he will be charged with having “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.” President Johnson’s nightmare of the right-wing reaction could well become a reality.

The only somewhat hopeful way out of this dilemma is for President Nixon now to share responsibility with the present Congress in offering the sole proposal that still might break the negotiating deadlock—a terminal date for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and an end to all U.S. bombing in Indochina in return for the safe withdrawal of forces and the phased return of POWs. As I write, the President has not yet made this proposal. The nation, I believe, would unite behind this approach. Such unity would not be without impact on Hanoi’s leaders, whatever their internal differences are, at this moment, with respect to a settlement of the war. For while Hanoi’s leaders may not be able to agree to propose such a solution, they may be able to agree to accept it.