

EXECUTIVE EXPLOITATION

RICHARD NIXON, ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY, AND THE VIETNAM WAR

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“We have been too often disappointed by the optimism of the American leaders, both in Vietnam and in Washington, to have faith any longer in the silver linings they find in the darkest clouds . . . To say that we are mired in a stalemate seems the only realistic, yet unsatisfactory, conclusion . . . It seems increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out will be to negotiate.”

-Walter Cronkite, 1968

On February 27, 1968, veteran CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite—and the “most trusted man in America”—addressed the nation just days after the now infamous Tet Offensive. Uncharacteristically, in this broadcast he integrated his own opinion regarding the North Vietnamese’s demoralizing surprise attack on the South’s capital of Saigon during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. The substantial American presence in Vietnam with an initial influx of military advisors began under John F. Kennedy and continued to grow through Lyndon Johnson’s extensive expansion of the war following the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. By the Tet

Offensive, the American military presence, contradicting claims of seeking “no wider war,” peaked with 536,000 U.S. soldiers active in 1968.¹ To this point, American leaders had consistently assured the public of progress, with victory close at hand. But now, Vietnam had grown into a fully-fledged war to prevent the spread of communism into Southeast Asia and to defend the liberties of American democracy abroad – the instrumentalization of Domino Theory diplomacy. According to many scholars, after

1. “Learn About the Vietnam War,” Digital History, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/vietnam/index.cfm>.



Tet the nation's optimistic outlook suffered a crushing blow, sending public support spiraling down towards dissent and marking a definitive turning point in the Vietnam conflict.² These claims seemed to be supported by responses from December 1967 to March 1968 to Gallup Poll's survey question: "In view of the developments since we entered the fighting in Vietnam, do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" Answers of 'yes' rose from 45 – 49%, while 'no' responses fell from 46 – 41%, marking the largest drop in support prior to Tet.³ However, this turning point did not lead to a swift end to American involvement. Instead, the war would be revamped once again with the inauguration of President Richard Nixon in January of 1969. It continued until Congress finally cut war funding indefinitely in July 1973.

This essay seeks to explain how and why American involvement in the Vietnam conflict persisted for so long, even after the events of the Tet Offensive. The actions of Nixon's executive administration from his first term election until the war's conclusion suggest that the end of American intervention in Vietnam was neither solely due to inadequate military strategy and execution nor faltering public support, as scholars have previously argued.⁴ Instead,

I argue that the Vietnam War was simply one of many pawns in the complex political game that was Nixon's administration. It was a tool of domestic politics used to shore up Nixon's legitimacy and to insure the stability of his presidency. With the correlation between the rise and tragic fall of the Executive branch during this period and America's slow exit from Vietnam, the symbiotic relationship between the two emerges and depicts a true abuse of power.

The 1968 Presidential election was a watershed in American politics. It marked the end of the New Deal Coalition. Republican candidate Richard Nixon successfully challenged this Democratic Party dynasty and assumed control of managing the numerous crises, domestic and international, including the struggle for American civil rights and the deteriorating situation in Vietnam. Part of his campaign's strength was his willingness to make often vague promises to end the war in Vietnam. This was something his Democratic opponents could not do, despite Johnson's celebrated "bombing halt" that October. The Paris Peace talks, undertaken shortly before the election, demonstrated promise; however, they were partially sabotaged by Nixon's campaign because the Republicans promised the South Vietnamese government an offer superior to Democrats' plans for negotiations.⁵ Before he resigned, Lyndon Johnson's Secretary of Defense

2. Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Liberal Order, 1964-1980*, (Roseville: Prima, 2007), 188.

3. Alec M. Gallup, Jr., *The Gallup Poll Cumulative Index: Public Opinion, 1937-1997: Volume 3* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 2109.

4. Ben Kiernan, "Review: The Vietnam War: Alternative Endings," *American Historical Review* 97 (1992): 1118-1137.

5. Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 2001).

Robert McNamara characterized the Democratic view of the war effort as: "We're in Vietnam 10% to help the South Vietnamese, 20% to hold back the Chinese, and 70% to save American face."⁶ By contrast, Nixon sought to reach a different end, one of victory not surrender, in order to preserve American honor and reputation, as well as his own. Allowing peace talks to conclude would not only have prevented him from rescuing America from international embarrassment, it would also have greatly threatened his entire election campaign. However, peace negotiations soon disintegrated, as the South Vietnamese government proved unsatisfied with the Democrats' terms. The Republicans solidified their control of the Vietnam conflict with a dominating victory in the 1968 Presidential election. Nixon was now the United States' Supreme Commander in Chief, and he would wield this power with a strong hand throughout his time in office.

From the infancy of his presidency, Richard Nixon yearned for individual greatness as well as national triumph, to be remembered and respected. America was the vessel that would grant him his place in history, and he believed that the prosperity and reputation of the nation were directly linked to his own. The Vietnam War offered a unique opportunity: it gave him the chance to change the war's trajectory from a growing mistake to an honorable effort by the world's

leading democratic nation to defend Southeast Asia for the greater good. This aspect of his agenda (which would continue throughout his presidency) was exemplified by his first Presidential inaugural address, in which he claimed: "The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker...If we succeed, generations to come will say of us now living that we mastered our moment, that we helped make the world safe for mankind."⁷ Alexander Butterfield, aide to Nixon's Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, also described this bittersweet hubris, stating that: "The president is very history-oriented and history-conscious about the role he is going to play, and is not at all subtle about it."⁸ The President's colossal need for commendation would grow to be fueled by his depraved ventures, from selfishly manipulating the Vietnam conflict to his involvement in the Watergate Scandal. By assuring the legitimacy of his quest for remembrance with an "ends justify the means" mentality, Nixon would gradually lose sight of the boundaries between personal gain, national prosperity, and moral rationale.

THE WAR

Outwardly, Nixon sought peace. Behind the scenes, he retrenched further into war. He began his first term in office with the slogan: "Peace with Honor." Yet Nixon immediately initiated

6. Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith, *The most dangerous man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers*, (Kovno Communications and InSight Productions, 2009), DVD.

7. Richard Nixon: "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1969, Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1941>.

8. Stanley Kutler, ed., *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes*, (New York: The Free Press, 1997), xiv.

a series of secretive operations in Vietnam including the bombing of Cambodia beginning in March 1969. With this “Operation Menu” kept hidden from public knowledge, support for Nixon’s handling of the war gradually rose throughout 1969 to 54% in August. This popularity was brief. Nixon’s approval rating dropped sharply to 45% in mid-September after the U.S. Army brought murder charges against Lt. William Calley for the horrific My Lai Massacre over a year before.⁹ This event sparked a massive surge in anti-war protests, including the famous October Moratorium in which millions of people around the nation participated. Still, from late September to mid-November, the President’s war approval rating swelled once again, jumping from 52 – 64%.¹⁰ Nixon’s maneuvers created an unexpected paradox: support for the President’s management of Vietnam grew to unprecedented levels, while open opposition to the war simultaneously grew. For Nixon, this indicated that in contrast to the loud, radical, left-wing anti-war protesters, much of Middle America sat quiet, mutely supporting the war effort in opposition to its condemnation.¹¹ This “Silent Majority” feared communist and anti-American influences and reacted defensively against protests denouncing the war effort. President Nixon mobilized this wariness

with his famous “Vietnamization” speech on November 3, 1969, just a couple weeks after the October Moratorium. His address utilized an animated call to patriotism to criticize rash demands for a swift end to American involvement. Instead, the President advocated a gradual process to transition the war effort from American to South Vietnamese hands. He consistently emphasized how America must not choose “the easy way... [But] the right way” in order to obtain a beneficial outcome in Vietnam. Nixon also subtly blamed Democrats for prolonging the war, all the while presenting himself as the honorable shepherd of victory.¹² With the promise of massive troop reductions and a valiant call to arms of the public, Nixon had solidified his position on Vietnam. The war would continue for “Peace with Honor,” while holding fast to Nixon’s policy of diminishing American involvement. This created a dilemma for the President that would linger throughout his time in office as he would progressively need more bombing campaigns in order to replace the thinning presence and use of ground forces required by his new approach.¹³

By 1970, public support fluctuated erratically in the context of constant protesting, troop withdrawals, and multiple bombing campaigns in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Yet it is clear that the

9. Joseph Carroll, *The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison*, (Graph: ‘Richard Nixon’s Approval Rating handling the Vietnam War, 1969-73’), Gallup.com, 15 June 2004. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>.

10. Carroll, *The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison*.

11. Matthew Motten, *Between War and Peace* (Free Press: New York, 2011).

12. President Nixon’s Speech on “Vietnamization,” November 3, 1969, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Richard Nixon, 1969, pp. 901-909. <http://vietnam.vassar.edu/overview/doc14.html>.

13. Alan Axelrod, *Political History of America’s Wars* (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2006).

timing of these troop reductions and military offensives strongly correlated. Nixon carefully tried to balance appeasing the public with maintaining martial pressure on Hanoi. On April 20th, in a televised address, Nixon announced the withdrawal of 150,000 soldiers over the next year; he claimed it as a consequence “based entirely off the progress” in Vietnam.¹⁴ Complementing this effort, the President ten days later publicized the plan to invade Cambodia, legitimizing this move by declaring, “I would rather be a one-term President and do what is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this Nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history.”¹⁵ Therein lay the dichotomy of Nixon’s intentions; he demonstrated his dedication to the “American Way” and his policy of Vietnamization, while also foreshadowing the war’s importance regarding his developing reelection campaign. Even early in his first term, Nixon realized the significance of conciliating the public while simultaneously maintaining a strong hand in Vietnam to prevent the loss of face, for the nation and for himself. An undesirable end to Vietnam, he believed, would prove disastrous to his political ambitions, so its longevity was ultimately a necessity. This was at the root of

Nixon’s “Decent-Interval Strategy,” which proposed the continuation of military force until negotiation terms were agreed upon that would allow enough delay between an American exit and a North Vietnamese victory. If this period was too small, the United States risked looking weak and cowardly, having simply abandoned their allies after so much bloodshed. This was something Nixon was not willing to tolerate.¹⁶

Protests, troop reductions, and bombings continued into 1971, while Nixon’s Vietnam approval slid from 64% in January 1970 to 41% by February 1971.¹⁷¹⁶ This significant decline occurred in the context of calamitous events: the Kent State protest shootings in May 1970 and the proposal of the Democrats’ McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, providing for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops by 31 Dec 1971 (which was rejected by the Senate). Additionally, Nixon’s plan for an offensive on the Laotian Ho Chi Minh Trail in February of 1971 further catalyzed the dwindling public opinion. It came just one month after Congress succeeded in repealing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, rendering the war’s origins illegitimate. Nixon responded characteristically, ignoring the significance of the resolution and holding fast to his self-authorized and ultimately illicit rights as Commander in Chief.¹⁸ Still, the President *was* adhering to his promises of Vietnamization; the Laos incursion was designed

14. “April 20, 1970: Nixon announces more troop withdrawals.” This Day in History, accessed 11 November 2011, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nixon-announces-more-troop-withdrawals>.

15. Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 30, 1970. <http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/nixon430.htm>.

16. Alan Axelrod, *Political History of America’s Wars*, (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2006).

17. Carroll, *The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison*.

18. Robert Longley, “How Congress Ends Wars,” <http://usgovinfo.about.com/od/uscongress/a/congresswar.htm>.

to be a South Vietnamese ground effort only, the first chance to prove their own capabilities. Although initially a success with the South Vietnam forces capturing important territory, within months the North Vietnamese quickly staged a counter-offensive, reclaiming lost ground. This caused great concern inside the Nixon administration as it threatened their “Decent-Interval” and demanded revamped military efforts to prolong the conflict and coincide with the 1972 elections.

THE PENTAGON PAPERS

June 1971 marked a significant turning point in the mentality of Nixon’s administration, when the *New York Times* released a momentous story regarding the Pentagon Papers. This 7,000-page collection of documents detailed an elaborate internal history of American involvement in Vietnam. Former military analyst and member of the prestigious RAND think-tank Daniel Ellsberg, who had gradually realized the terrible nature of the war, leaked the documents to the *Times*. After hearing of the articles pertaining to the Pentagon Papers, Nixon drastically altered much of his administration’s focus and strategy regarding Vietnam and other issues, trivializing each as mere matters affecting his prospect of reelection. Correspondingly, the Pentagon Papers would bring out paranoia, secrecy, and an illicit atmosphere within Washington as the war itself became less of a prominent issue in the wake of developing internal crises.

The Pentagon Papers’ release described the Vietnam War

within the chronological context of *only* the Kennedy and Johnson administrations but held wider ramifications for Nixon’s presidency as well. During the first few weeks after their publication, the President and his confidants regularly debated the merits of the leak. On the one hand, it depicted the dishonest and dishonorable maneuvers of prior Democratic Presidents; yet, on the other, it represented both “a devastating security breach of the greatest magnitude of anything [Security advisor A. Haig had] ever seen,” and the misconduct of the entire governmental institution.¹⁹ The day after the story broke, Bob Haldeman warned the President of these possibly profound and enduring consequences:

[The Papers] don’t hurt us politically so much. They hurt the others. But what they really hurt, and this is what the intellectuals – and one of the motivations of the *Times* must be – is it hurts the government. What it says is... to the ordinary guy, all this is a bunch of gobbledygook. But out of the gobbledygook comes a very clear thing, which is: You can’t trust the government, you can’t believe what they say and you can’t rely on their judgment. And that the implicit infallibility of presidents, which has been an accepted thing in America, is badly hurt by this, because it shows that people do

19. David Coleman, Ken Hughes, and Erin Mahan, *The Nixon Tapes: Transcripts*, Presidential Recording Program, 2011, Meeting tape, June 13, 1971 - 12:18pm, <http://whitehousetapes.net/transcript/Nixon>.

things the president wants to do even though it's wrong. And the president can be wrong.²⁰

Popular doubts in how the government functioned and upheld "democracy" had been mounting as a result of the Vietnam War and other internal issues. With Nixon furthering the gradual expansion of Executive power, he was forced to fall deeper into concealment to preserve his governing authority at the cost of public liberty. To the President, "success" depended on the effectiveness of his actions alone, not on how strictly he upheld democratic principles.

From the beginning, Nixon had to carefully choose how to handle the Pentagon Paper situation. His guarded personality and aggressive attitude managed to trounce ethical reservations and eventually to publicize exactly what he would try so hard to conceal. Possibly supplementing these growing fears, the story in the *Times* came not even one week after Teddy Kennedy's speech about ending the war in which he stated:

The only possible excuse for continuing the discredited policy of Vietnamizing the war, now and in the months ahead, seems to be the President's intention to play his last great card for peace at a time close to November 1972, when the chances will be greater that the action will benefit the coming presidential election campaign... How many more American

soldiers must die, how many innocent Vietnamese civilians must be killed, so that the final end to the war may be announced in 1972 instead of 1971?²¹

Given the fragile scenario in Washington after June of 1971, Nixon initiated a complex political strategy in order to save his place in history, punish his enemies, and guarantee his reelection in 1972. This multi-faceted procedure involved a mass declassification of documents from prior administrations, legal actions regarding the release of the Pentagon Papers, and investigations into everyone involved. Additionally, Nixon ordered undercover operations to be carried out to not only discredit Ellsberg, but also to destroy or prevent any injurious documents from getting out in the future.

Nixon's plans to handle the security breach began chaotically, because Ellsberg had gone underground, his identity as the culprit still unknown. Nearly immediately, the White House initiated printing halts on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and it filed suits against the newspapers for illegally publishing classified documents. The President also desperately searched for those accountable. In his conversation with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Nixon seemingly ruled out civilians completely as suspects for the leaking of the Pentagon Papers; he was sure it was the Democrats and proposed plans to put the suspects under

20. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting tape, June 14, 1971 - 8:49 am.

21. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Telephone tape 005-002.

oath to prosecute them for treason, or for perjury if they lied.²² Nixon had always been party-oriented, yet after the Papers' leak, he seemed to barricade himself within his administration. He became constantly suspicious and talked to Kissinger about "really cleaning house when we have the opportunity" and firing people to insure loyalty and security.²³

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Throughout the week following the story in the *Times*, Nixon and his trusted advisors discussed a strategy to break into the Brookings Institute (another think-tank like RAND) to steal documents detrimental to Lyndon Johnson, along with any damaging to his own presidency. He voiced his concern to Kissinger saying, "they'll have the whole story of the Menu Series," referring to the secret bombings of Cambodia and Laos throughout 1969 and 1970.²⁴ He ordered the break-in to be "implemented on a thievery basis. Goddamn it, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it."²⁵ For Nixon, the Pentagon Papers represented a threat to the order of American politics, and he could not afford to overlook the leak if he hoped to maintain control of not only sensitive information but the fate of his administration. His aides agreed, Presidential aide Roger Colson bluntly explained

that, "if you allow something like [the leak] to go unchallenged then you are encouraging it; an unending flow of it...but if you nail it hard it helps to keep people in line and discourage others."²⁶ Nixon was determined to prevent anything of the sort from happening again with the formidable powers of the Executive branch at his disposal.

Eventually Daniel Ellsberg revealed himself as the "leaker" and even held a televised interview with Walter Cronkite. However, the effect of the Pentagon Papers seemed to be waning. Ellsberg described this reality, saying that the American public "hear it, they learn from it, they understand it, and then proceed to ignore it."²⁷ But Nixon could never believe that Ellsberg had carried out such a large-scale security breach alone. Instead, he imagined a massive conspiracy against his administration. The President, Kissinger, and Haldeman discussed polygraphing a massive number of government employees to find who leaked the papers. Nixon demanded that even "if they're on the golf course, on the tennis courts, going to New York or to Boston or someplace or to Nassau, get those fuckers back here and polygraph them. Is that clear? Every goddamn one that had access to it. Now I mean it. Everyone."²⁸ Nixon matched his efforts to prevent leaks regarding his administration by

22. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting tape, June 13, 1971 - 3:09pm.

23. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting tape, June 13, 1971 - 3:09pm.

24. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting Tape, June 15, 1971 - 10:39am.

25. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting Tape, June 17, 1971 - 5:15pm.

26. Rmm413c, "NIXON TAPES: "Fight All Out" over Pentagon Papers (Chuck Colson)," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDhsmHGYzi&feature=related>.

27. Ehrlich and Goldsmith.

28. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting Tape, July 24, 1971 - 9:43am. <http://whitehousetapes.net/transcript/nixon>.

continuing discussions of releasing damaging information about his enemies. They discussed linking Ellsberg to communist groups and planned to provide stories of him killing innocent Vietnamese civilians from the back of a Jeep as well, regardless of their validity.²⁹ Ultimately, they also devised plans of breaking into his psychiatrist's office to find documents damaging to his credibility and mental stability. Nixon's dirty tricks would continue to proliferate as he fell further into secrecy.

Nixon's attempts to quiet the media failed. On June 30, 1971, the United States Supreme Court ruled that, in the case of *New York Times Co. vs. the United States*, there was no act of treason and that the media was permitted to resume printing the contents of the Pentagon Papers. In response to this, efforts to discredit the "conspiracy" intensified as Nixon advised Kissinger and Attorney General John Mitchell to not "worry about [Ellsberg's] trial...try him in the press...we want to destroy him in the press."³⁰ He didn't want Ellsberg "to be brought up until after the election" and wanted to utilize the media to separate himself from the leak, trial, and issues they brought up.³¹ Nixon continued to organize his infamous break-in team, known as the "Plumbers," who would later carry out the plan to break into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office, delegating CIA officer Howard

Hunt and FBI official Gordon Liddy as its supervisors. The Plumbers would ultimately grow to be a part of a larger organization identified as CREEP, or the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. On top of this illegal organization, President Nixon continued to push for leaks regarding documents injurious to anyone he viewed as threatening. He described leaking as "a game," legitimizing his actions by saying "We're up against an enemy, a conspiracy, their using any means, we are going to use any means as necessary."³² For the President, the Pentagon Papers threatened the stability of his campaign. Vietnam was supposed to boost his chances; now there was a risk of it destroying him, directly and indirectly. The administration's illicit approach was now in full tilt and would not slow down as ethical judgment increasingly fell to the wayside.

The leak had created a lasting foundation for the Administration's growing misconduct. It began as efforts to prevent future security breaches, but as the story of the leak progressed, the public gradually overlooked its significance. Nixon grew to see the Pentagon Papers as a useful tool instead of a threat to his political position in Washington or Vietnam. The national majority's seemingly apathetic attitude regarding their release was disheartening. He planned to re-release the Papers to the media, along with the accumulated documents damaging to any and all Democrats: "Get the eyes off of Vietnam [leading up to the 1972 election]. It

29. Stanley Kutler, ed., *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes*, (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 6; Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, Meeting Tape, July 24, 1971 - 9:43am. <http://whitehousetapes.net/transcript/nixon>

30. Kutler, 6.

31. Kutler, 11.

32. Coleman, Hughes, and Mahan, 2011, Meeting Tape, July 24, 1971 - 9:43; Kutler, 8.

gets them thinking about the past rather than our present problems.”³³ He reiterated this important agenda explaining how the media was the only option; bringing them to the Senate floor or the Supreme Court would be worthless. “If it goes to Congress...John [Erlichman] feels that we couldn’t control them. In terms of leaking it into the court, it won’t come out until after the election, which is too late to do us any good.”³⁴ Nixon needed the Vietnam War and the fallout from the Pentagon Papers leak to *survive*, as his administration was beginning to dissolve. This quandary became all the more clear as the election drew nearer and the Watergate scandal would grow out of the activities of CREEP and the Plumbers, all with Nixon’s knowledge and even direction.

THE CONCEALED CAMPAIGN

Throughout 1971, domestic issues involving Vietnam dominated discussion within the White House, but the war abroad remained an important issue for the public as bombings and protests continued. Nixon seemed to be making little progress in Vietnam, good or bad, still holding true to promises of troop reductions while continuing to initiate military campaigns. This was exemplified by the bombings of Haiphong beginning in late March and with the mining of many North Vietnamese harbors. Similarly, peace talks with Hanoi continued to begin and end abruptly, something quite important to Nixon in order to maintain the impression of

improvement in Vietnam. As part of Nixon’s “Mad Man Theory,” he intended to use sporadic bombings as a way to keep Hanoi guessing in order to push North Vietnam toward beneficial negotiations. His “Decent-Interval” plan relied on the success of these negotiations, still in the works, because only favorable terms could provide any hopes of saving face in Vietnam.

In 1972, Nixon continued down the path towards his eventual resignation as he arranged a diverse array of actions to promote his campaign while damaging the Democrats. This included influencing Democratic Senator Eugene McCarthy to run as an independent in order to steal votes in the election, leaking documents about the Bay of Pigs, and releasing tax returns from contributors to candidates Hubert Humphrey and Ed Muskie.³⁵ Additionally, Nixon ordered wiretaps on the Democratic nominee for President George McGovern because he was “affecting the peace negotiations.”³⁶ On this note, the administration also sought to release photographs of anti-war protestors supporting McGovern holding signs saying, “Communism must win in Southeast Asia.” Nixon planned to gain support for his handling of the negotiations by portraying the protestors and McGovern as un-patriotic.³⁷ Furthermore and most notoriously, Nixon ordered a break-in at the Democratic National Committee Headquarters. These occurred on two separate occasions

33. Kutler, 8.

34. Kutler, 34.

35. Kutler, 27, 28-89.

36. Kutler, 92.

37. Kutler, 155-56.

in May and June of 1972. Both were failed efforts, but the misconduct of these illegal entries was discovered, and seven of Nixon's "Plumbers" were indicted for the break-in. They remained unassociated with the administration as a whole, and they would not go to court until the next year. Nixon and his aides rejoiced greatly over this as they assumed they were out of harm's way.³⁸ The cover up began as Nixon fell further into secrecy plagued by doubts regarding the loyalty of his personnel. Once again, the election took primary importance as Haldeman optimistically planned ahead for their next term saying, "I would think that we could get some people with guts in the second term, when we don't care about the repercussions."³⁹

Concurrently, the war once again grew in importance. With the Watergate indictments delayed until after the election, Nixon once again focused on utilizing the Vietnam situation to benefit his campaign. His "Mad-Man" tactics were epitomized during a meeting in May of 1972, where he raged about how America must intensify the bombing offensive to draw a favorable scenario for that November's election:

Here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna get through it. We're going to cream them. This is not anger. This is all business. This is not "petulance." That's all bullshit.

I should have done it long ago. I just didn't follow my instincts. I'll see that the United States does not lose. I'm putting it quite bluntly. I'll be quite precise. South Vietnam may lose. But the United States cannot lose . . . For once, we've got to use the maximum power of this country . . . against this shit-ass little country: to win the war.⁴⁰

Nixon's war policy was now completely defined by the Decent-Interval Strategy; all hopes for legitimate military triumph had vanished. Incursions by the South Vietnamese supported by American bombing campaigns would continue throughout the year as peace talks, particularly between Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese diplomat Le Duc Tho, seemed to be progressing. The election approached, and on October 26, 1972, Kissinger announced at a press conference: "We believe peace is at hand."⁴¹ This was exactly the pre-election boost that Nixon had planned on; his Presidential approval ratings reached a height of 62% after Kissinger's declaration.⁴² Nixon won the 1972 election by a landslide, fulfilling his ambition for a second term. For Kissinger, the war in Vietnam was the linchpin of Nixon's campaign against McGovern; Nixon had "made Vietnam your issue and his weakness."⁴³ Still,

38. "7 indictments close US Probe into Watergate Bugging Case," *Kentucky New Era*, September 16, 1972, 144..<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=266&dat=19720901&id=ovArAAAAIbAJ&sjid=EGkFAAAAiBAJ&pg=827,1616375>.

39. Kutler, 114.

40. Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and The Pentagon Papers*, (New York: Penguin, 2002), 419.

41. "Transcript: Peace is at Hand, 1968-1973," *American Experience*, 29 March, 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/series/pt.09.html>.

42. Carroll, *The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison*.

43. Rmm413d, "Richard Nixon Tapes: Election Night 1972 (Henry Kissinger)," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBLR8OeqimQ>.

the situation in Vietnam lingered.

INEVITABLE ENDS

Peace talks dissolved. President Nguyen Van Thieu proved unwilling to sign a treaty that allowed Northern troops to remain in South Vietnam. Kissinger then refused to go back to Vietnam after the negotiations failed frustratingly. So Nixon, with renewed plans to push Hanoi toward favorable terms, sent the more assertive National Security advisor Alexander Haig as his new ambassador. Increasingly aggressive policy led to the initiation of Operation Linebacker II, bombing campaigns that devastated North Vietnam and became known as the “Christmas Bombings.” This caused a sharp drop in public opinion as Nixon’s approval rating dropped to 51% at the beginning of 1973.⁴⁴ The President still pushed for acceptable terms, something that seemed increasingly detached from reality. With the Watergate scandal growing, Nixon needed another boost in support and decided to push negotiations. On January 27, 1973, all parties signed the Paris Peace Accords, marking an official end to direct military involvement by the United States. This monumental event for the American people led to an explosion in Nixon’s approval rating to an unprecedented level of 67%.⁴⁵ However, unknown to the public, Nixon still had plans to expand the conflict as he undoubtedly expected North Vietnam to violate the treaty agreements allowing for military action to be resumed. But

this would once again be affected by the developing Watergate scandal, which ultimately prevented the administration from carrying out plans to resume the fighting. Henry Kissinger accurately portrayed this concept explaining how the “tragedy was a domestic situation...In April [1973], Watergate blew up, and we were castrated...the second tragedy was that we were not permitted to enforce the agreement [Paris peace treaty]...I think it’s reasonable to assume [Nixon] would have bombed the hell out of them during April.”⁴⁶

Instead, Nixon sat helplessly on April 30th when Watergate was linked to high-ups in his administration, and he was forced to announce the resignations of his beloved and trusted associates Bob Haldeman and Domestic Counsel Chair John Erlichman. With this, along with the unfolding cover up and Nixon’s involvement (supplemented by the release of the “Smoking Gun” Nixon Tapes in July), the executive branch crumbled and became an example of corruption, deceit, and immoral self-interest. In order to permanently dismantle this Executive misconduct, Congress passed the War Powers Act in May, giving the legislature sole authority to order military intervention. Additionally, with the realization of Nixon’s manipulative government, Congress passed House Joint Resolution 636 on July 1, which stated that, “no funds herein or heretofore appropriated may be obligated or expended to finance directly or indirectly combat activities by

44. Carroll, *The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison*.

45. Carroll, *The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison*.

46. Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*, (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 7-8.

United States military forces in or over or from off the shores of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia.”⁴⁷ Finally, Congress reached a lasting conclusion of the Vietnam conflict as it carried out actions to prevent the abuse of the separation of powers; after lengthy trials, Richard Nixon became the first and only American President to resign from office August 9, 1974, the foreseen outcome since the events of mid-1972.

Richard Nixon came into office in 1969 with dreams of victory in Vietnam, politics, and popular history. Instead of the war's conclusion bringing him admiration and respect, it was actually linked to Nixon's own destruction. Throughout his presidency, Nixon and his administration continuously overstepped their legitimate power in order to secure longevity in office. Along with many political transgressions, this involved manipulating the situation in Vietnam to provide a needed public support boost leading up to the 1972 election. Vietnamization was a policy introduced in order to delay the conflict by appeasing the American population while also allowing for continued military involvement. The evolution of the “Decent-Interval” and “Mad-Man” strategies were part of Nixon's plan to utilize Vietnam for political success. However, all of his secrecy and illegal activity backfired and provided an unsatisfactory exit from Vietnam while taking an administration

from honor and praise to shame and disdain. “The Pentagon Papers affair ... led directly to the unraveling and final disintegration of the Nixon presidency,” which would then give Congress unopposed authority to end American involvement in Vietnam.⁴⁸ This would later be tested by Gerald Ford, Nixon's successor, when he asked Congress for an enormous aid package for South Vietnam during the North's resumed offensive; however, Congress rejected Ford's request, setting a precedence of Congressional authority. Without this enduring result, one can only wonder how long America would have remained involved in the military conflict in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, the progression of Nixon's administration and the Vietnam War from 1969–1973 would provide an potent example of some of the issues at the heart of the Cold War. It was not only in Southeast Asia that America battled to fend off communism while preserving its own prosperity and influence around the globe. But to what degree aspirations of democratic safeguarding outweighed selfish geopolitical ambition during this period may forever remain a mystery.

47. “Bill Summary & Status 93rd Congress (1973 - 1974) H.J.RES.636,” Library of Congress, <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d093:HJ00636:@@L&summ2=m&>.

48. Michael Belknap, review of *The Day the Presses Stopped: A History of the Pentagon Papers Case* by David Rudenstine, *American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 1263-1264.