HOW THIS ALL ENDS: NIXON’S PATH FROM VIETNAM, OBAMA’S AFGHAN GAMBLE AND FORGING PEACE FROM WAR

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a conflicts study - but rather than primarily examining origins or conduct, it aims to explore and illuminate the causes and conditions for reconciliation in wartime, successful and unsuccessful. This study takes in-depth looks at two periods of history in two Asian conflicts – the Vietnam War in 1972, and the United States’ intervention in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012, and how their similarities and differences hold implications for reconciliation and peace in the midst of war. The scope will cover specific time periods of these conflicts – 1972 being a pivotal year of the Vietnam War, directly preceding the Paris Peace Accords, the other an eventful period of the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan – President Barack Obama’s surge of combat forces from 2009 to 2012. The thesis is organized in four chapters, with the first, “Introduction,” laying out the premise, that the two periods are vital to this study, and some background on policies and assumptions in both the Vietnam and Afghanistan conflicts. The second chapter, “The Penultimate Act,” explores events, conditions and actions which conspired to make 1972 a decisive year in the Vietnam War, and what results were borne by these events. The third chapter, “The Good War,” will explain President Barack Obama’s “surge” in Afghanistan from 2009-2012, the
policies and assumptions driving the decision making about the period, and the goals and the results of the adopted policies. The last chapter, “Conclusion: The ‘Limits of Our Capabilities’,” will examine similarities, differences and key lessons from the two conflicts.
AUTHOR’S NOTE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The roots of this thesis go back to more than a decade ago, when I was completing my undergraduate studies and considering various career choices - but fascinated with the world and my country’s role in shaping its history, particularly through force. As I progressed, first in my time in newspapers, then as a military writer and editor, I began to see how the United States’ interactions with other nations and peoples in the aftermath of September 2001 were driven by the instruments of our national security apparatus – the tools of military power and diplomacy, both in public and in private. I observed firsthand often how these actions and events affected outcomes.

I first visited Afghanistan in April 2007 on a reporting assignment, landing in the middle of the night in the back of a transport airplane filled with soldiers arriving at Bagram Airfield, a facility about 25 miles north of the capital of Kabul. While the war had been displaced in the headlines at that time by raging violence in Iraq, the sense of intractable conflict seeking a way forward was apparent. One couldn’t help but notice many buildings still featured Russian script, and wreckage of old Soviet military equipment was as much a part of the landscape in some areas as the mountainous peaks were prominent on the skyline, even becoming part of locals’ homes (clotheslines were observed on more than a few abandoned tank hulks).

By the time I began my studies at Georgetown in 2009, I was full of observations (many firsthand) about how the near-decade of war the United States was
prosecuting in Central Asia was playing out. During this time as well, new and revealing research has since been released regarding America’s experience in Vietnam, long-sealed documents have been declassified, and important perspectives from long-sealed archives around the world are helping scholars better understand events now some 40 years removed from headlines. I pursued my academic interests in Southeast Asian and conflict studies, and, in my readings of America’s history with Asia, I began to observe fascinating similarities – not in events, but rather in perceptions, assumptions and actions taken by the U.S. and its allies and the goals they sought. This spurred my interests in academic studies in not only Southeast Asian history – and the history of America’s conflict in Vietnam over a generation earlier – but in the complicated dynamics at play at the highest levels of power, here in America and abroad. War, as the famous theorist Carl Von Clausewitz once wrote, is the prosecution of political goals by other means. As time went by, I would become hard pressed to disagree with this observation. By the time of my second trip to Afghanistan in 2011, as troop levels were building as part of the so called “surge” of President Barack Obama, I was determined to conduct some study into the relationship between war and reconciliation in America’s experiences in Afghanistan and Vietnam – how the twin arms of diplomacy and military force and violence are used not to gain victory, but to gain narrowly defined goals. This thesis is the culmination of those efforts.

A few notes are in order for the purposes of the researcher and reader. Though this thesis cites scholars who make extensive use of Vietnamese language sources, this
thesis does not use diacritics as per modern Vietnamese script due to word processing constraints. Most Vietnamese names cited will use the given names where warranted (save for commonly familiar ones, such as Ho Chi Minh, who I will refer to as most Vietnamese do as “Ho” after first reference). In most cases, I will use Westernized spelling for Vietnamese geographical terms, such as Haiphong instead of Hai Phong, unless it is part of a direct quote.

This thesis would not be written today were it not for the encouragement, support, aid, patience and assistance of many persons around the world. I cannot thank all of them, but several deserve recognition.

Firstly, I want to thank several of my editors and managers through the years who urged me to light out into the world, and shared their sage advice and support for both my professional and academic pursuits. These include Gregory Barbera, Jeffrey Mitchell, Brett Kofford, John Correll, Robert Dudney (who handed me a copy of Evelyn Waugh’s “Scoop” on the eve of my first trip to Central Asia), and my many colleagues who have shared my journeys. To my thesis advisor, Prof. Pamela Sodhy, my profound thanks for her time and input into making this work better, one chapter at a time and for her part in helping me discover the oft underappreciated world of Southeast Asian studies. To my Washington, D.C. godfather, fixer and Jedi Master, Mark Perry, who gave generously of his time and expertise over the years to better help some young upstart understand how the world of power politics and deal making works for good and ill, from Washington D.C. to Beirut to Kabul. To Dr. Kimberly Collins of the California State University at San Bernardino, I owe a debt for continued
encouragement to pursue my academic interests long before I arrived at the Hilltop, and to Georgetown Profs. Gregory Havrilak, David Steinberg and Joseph Smaldone I owe thanks for making me think harder about conflict and peace in the world – their observations served as the seed corn for this thesis in many ways.

I want to specifically mention of the smartest working scholars in the academy and someone whom I am fortunate to call a friend, the University of Kentucky’s Prof. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen. Her help, research, assistance and advice when I was assembling the materials for this work could not have been timelier. Without her extensive scholarship on the Cold War era Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its allies, this study would be nearly impossible.

My many thanks for the love and support of my family – especially my mother, Rosemary Pate, for her patience all those years ago in grade school when I devoured war histories to her chagrin, to my father Tony Schanz for passing along the love of the written word, and to my sister Maria Schanz for listening to countless rambling discussions on my interests, studies and experiences.

Finally, I save special thanks for Lana (SFS 11’) – who has changed my life for the better since the day we met on the Hilltop, after one of my many Tuesday night classes. We share an abiding love and curiosity about Southeast Asia and the world, its sights, sounds, flavors, sorrows, ridiculousness, injustices and more numerous joys. This work would not be what it is today, or even complete, without her support. With all of my affection - anh yeu em.
EPIGRAPH

Dan long cho doi it lau,/ Chay ra thi cung nam sau voi gi
[Wait a little while,/ Sooner or later the result will be the same the following year so why hurry]

-Excerpted from Truyen Kieu, by Nguyen Du (1765-1820)

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is [rightly to understand] the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

-Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831)
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: AN INHERITED “WAR FOR PEACE”

The study of America’s wars and their conduct has long garnered attention from scholars, researchers and writers seeking to understand their causes and conduct. The aim of this thesis, however, is not primarily concerned with the causes of the conflicts in question, but rather conditions for their reconciliation – successful and unsuccessful. It is why this study will explore a pivotal period in America’s war in Vietnam, the events of 1972, and contrast them with the events in the U.S. war in Afghanistan from 2009 to 2012, as they are vital to understanding the conditions, assumptions, policies and actions which lead to opportunities for peace. This chapter aims to explain the premise of this thesis, highlighting the unique factors and events that made these two periods so pivotal in regards to attempts at carving peace out of war. Critical to understanding these periods, the background on policies, events and assumptions leading to these two periods in Vietnam and Afghanistan must be first explained in this chapter, as well as the actions taken by America, its enemies and its allies. In doing so, this chapter will lay out why the periods examined here have great contemporary relevance to leaders and policy makers today dealing with the thorny issues surrounding the settlement and termination of conflict.

Through the next four chapters, this study will show how assumptions, decisions and courses of action by the United States, its allies and adversaries regarding the use of military power and diplomacy affected outcomes at key junctures
in time – and reveal how the conditions for “peace” can be forged in war, and when they cannot. In some ways, this study is an examination of how the United States has attempted to force a peace out of two inherited wars, both fought on the Asian continent, both conflicts which, at the time, presented American leaders with few clear cut avenues for success – regardless of how “success” would be defined.

On January 20, 1969, Richard Milhous Nixon assumed the office of President of the United States, inheriting the leadership of a divided and strife-filled country and a stalemate war in Southeast Asia, which was draining American resources. Lyndon Johnson, Nixon’s predecessor who had expanded the war after his succession of the assassinated John F. Kennedy, had cut back bombing of North Vietnam in spring 1968 before ending it completely by that November. The Tet Offensive of January 1968, while militarily debilitating for the North Vietnamese communists and their allies in South Vietnam, had succeeded in discrediting the Johnson administration’s policy of escalation – which had built up in the mind of the American public that the communists were on the verge of defeat, if not severely militarily weakened.1

A divisive and polarizing conflict from its inception, support for the Vietnam War was never robust in the U.S., and continued to decline, as the Johnson Administration appeared to stumble – aided by opposition to the conflict, criticism of inept prosecution of the war, and attempts at negotiations. America’s long buildup of forces in Vietnam was coming to an end by late 1968, soon to be followed with troop

reductions, as U.S. financial resources were becoming constrained. Retired U.S. Army officer Lewis Sorley correctly notes in his study of the conflict’s later years that “Lyndon Johnson had in effect been driven from office by these escalating forces, while Richard Nixon’s tenure would of necessity constitute an extended attempt to moderate and adapt to them without losing all control.”

Victory, by the time of the Nixon Presidency, was not a topic of serious conversation anymore. Despite his record of staunch anti-communism throughout his political career, by the time he arrived in the Oval Office Nixon understood his election as a mandate to end American involvement in Vietnam on acceptable terms. At the same time, he had to preserve as much of America’s credibility on the world stage as possible. Accepting the Republican Party’s nomination for President in August 1968, Nixon said the first priority of his foreign policy would be “to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam” and, as part of this, negotiation was an indispensable tool of U.S. national power. Nixon, and his advisors – to include future National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger – believed America’s credibility as a superpower hinged on their success in transitioning from the Vietnam conflict, and the language Nixon used in the campaign echoed this sentiment. For example, in his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination for the Presidency, Nixon declared, “after an era of confrontation, the time has come for an era of negotiations. Where the

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world’s superpowers are concerned, there is no acceptable alternative to peaceful negotiations.”

The manner in which the U.S. sought an end to the conflict would be more important than peace itself to the new American administration, Vietnam scholar Pierre Asselin observed, and a swift collapse of the South – the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) – would affect Nixon’s attempts to shape the global order after the war. Nixon and Kissinger, in the coming years, would initiate a careful diplomatic and military strategy targeting America’s rivals abroad, exploiting Cold War animosities, and enabling allies, a process which would culminate in the eventful year of 1972 – with the use of aerial bombing campaigns, while simultaneously conducting direct talks with the North Vietnamese. An agreement was reached in January 1973 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the document ending American participation in the Vietnam War.

The “peace” achieved in Paris in January 1973 has remained controversial to this day. The RVN survived just over two more years until its collapse, as American funding dried up and the troops and tanks of the North’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) finally rolled into Saigon in April 1975. Today, the Vietnam War stands as one of the most scrutinized periods of modern American history – yet the examination is often limited to the war’s earlier years, before the Tet Offensive of 1968 – an event which occurred just shy of five years prior to the signing of the Paris Accords. Sorley

3 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 13.

4 Ibid., 13-14.
notes that many of the well-known Western and U.S. histories of the conflict dedicate the bulk of their study to events occurring before the Tet Offensive – and very little to the four years which followed, leading up to the signing of the Paris Accords. The famous “Pentagon Papers,” made public in 1971, cover the war only to the end of U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s tenure in 1968. “To many people… the story of the early years seems to be the whole story of the war in Vietnam, a perception that is far from accurate,” Sorley writes.⁵

The imbalance of scholarship, in other words, does less service to the decisions and events in the critical years following Tet 1968, which set the stage for the events of 1972, and the signing of the Paris Accords. The historical record regarding the conflict continues to evolve today, as long-sealed archives are now accessible both in the U.S. and abroad, and a new generation of scholars are turning attention to the war’s later years, and the decisions made by leaders on all sides prior to Paris. Still, the cultural experience of the war in America has greatly affected popular perceptions. Commentators today readily analogize and draw parallels between the Vietnam War with the U.S. experience in Afghanistan since the October 2001 invasion to topple the country’s Taliban rulers – who aided and sheltered the Al Qaida network of the now-deceased Osama bin Laden. The conflict has now entered its second decade in what most analyses suggest is a slow grinding stalemate.

But these are casual parallels that are often unfocused, lumping long periods of history, dissimilar events and circumstances together in analogies that are often ill-

⁵ Sorley, A Better War, xiv.
fitting after careful examination. As Nixon revealed in his Vietnam policy decisions, how America ends its wars is just as important a topic for examination, if not more so, than how they are initiated. The events leading up to the Paris Accords prove this indelibly. In light of the past decade the U.S. has spent prosecuting a war in Afghanistan, and the Obama Administration’s receivership of this conflict that it now seeks to disengage from, the questions regarding how the United States extracts itself from conflict prove immensely relevant today. At the highest levels of power, in Washington, D.C. and in capitals around the world, America and its allies are once again grappling with the thorny problem of how to step back from yet another Asian war. And doing so while maintaining global credibility, using the very same tools Nixon employed in Southeast Asia: a mix of diplomacy and military force to gain these ends.

To seek answers and illuminate lessons, this thesis scrutinizes two specific periods in these conflicts – the military and diplomatic events of the year 1972 (and the events which set the stage for this timeframe to become so decisive) leading up to the suspension of the Linebacker II bombing campaign, and the decision by Obama to add and then draw down over 30,000 troops to the Afghan war between 2009 and 2012. These two periods of history have a very important common thread connecting them – as in both cases, U.S. leadership attempted to assert its diplomatic and military power and influence to force some form of a negotiated settlement with its enemies. The questions about assumptions, actions and results in these two historical periods guide this study.
In Nixon’s case, diplomatic and military events culminated in the signing of the Paris Accords. Contemporary open sources and scholarly research reveals that the Obama Administration attempted its own diplomatic approach with the Taliban and its allies during the military surge, which ended in late 2012 – an effort which proved inconclusive. The goal of this period in Afghanistan, according to U.S. officials, military officers and diplomats, was to create conditions favorable to a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, though the thinking on how to do this would evolve over the period of the military surge.\(^6\)

On the surface, observers would be hard pressed not to see the similar conditions confronting Nixon in 1969 and Obama in 2009. Obama came into office succeeding President George W. Bush, at a time when public weariness of the Afghan war (and the war in Iraq) continued to mount. The financial burdens on Americans were rising due to growing economic hardship – and prior to his election, Obama expressed doubts about how good the situation was from the perspective of America’s ally, Afghan President Hamid Karzai. By the time Obama occupied the White House in early 2009, he and his advisors harbored grave doubts about Karzai – who Bush had lauded as a force for democracy and legitimate, stable governance in the war torn country. But Obama regarded Karzai as a mercurial leader, who condoned corruption, tolerated warlords and alienated would be allies.\(^7\)


\(^7\) Ibid., 83.
By late 2009, when Obama and his advisors had settled on expanding the war after a long strategic review, they noted it was an effort to buy time, not an attempt to achieve any kind of definitive victory. The offensive would ease America’s burden of fighting a long, protracted guerilla war, Obama claimed. “I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan,” Obama said in a televised December 2009 speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. After 18 months, these troops would be gradually pulled out of Afghanistan, he continued – and the resources of the surge would allow America and its allies to “seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.”

At the same time, Obama seemingly understood the mood of the country (much like Nixon in 1969), in that the public did not appear willing to support an open-ended conflict – and tied the military expansion to a strict timeline. “The absence of a time frame for transition would deny us any sense of urgency in working with the Afghan government,” he said in his West Point address. “It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war.”

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9 Ibid.
In hindsight, Obama himself dealt with the cultural legacy of the Vietnam War as he grappled with his options in 2009, though not personally as he was born in 1961. Several of his advisors and officials in his administration had personal experience in Vietnam War-era Southeast Asia early in their careers – and their experiences affected how they looked at America’s conflict in Afghanistan. A prime example was Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan affairs, who spent the early years of his State Department career as a USAID field officer in the Mekong Delta, before moving on to a staff position at the U.S. Embassy in Saigon during the Johnson Administration.\(^\text{10}\) Publicly, however, Obama disparaged comparisons of his war in Afghanistan with the Vietnam experience as a “false reading of history,” and took pains to note any real endgame in Central Asia would involve seeking a negotiated settlement of some kind, previewing his administration’s jumbled efforts to reach out diplomatically to the Taliban.\(^\text{11}\)

Like Nixon, he seemingly believed American credibility as a superpower would be affected and judged by how it disengaged from the Afghan war. Americans, Obama said in the closing of his West Point address, “will have to show our strength in the way that we end wars and prevent conflict – not just how we wage wars.”\(^\text{12}\) The results of Obama’s military and diplomatic efforts by the end of his military surge, however,

\(^{\text{10}}\) Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 222-223.

\(^{\text{11}}\) Obama, “Remarks on Afghanistan 1 December 2009.”

\(^{\text{12}}\) Ibid.
would differ significantly from Nixon’s forty years earlier – insofar as creating the conditions necessary for a negotiated settlement. This study will explore the reasons why, as of this writing, the United States is no closer to peace in Afghanistan today than it was at the time of Obama’s address to the cadets of the U.S. Military Academy – while Nixon’s Paris agreement was inked less than a month after the conclusion of 1972’s Linebacker II bombing campaign.

The scholarship on America’s war in Vietnam, particularly its later years, expands even today - decades after the conflict’s end. As a result, scholars and researchers now have a more nuanced perspective on the conflict’s assumptions and policies, from all sides – and this is critical to understanding why the events of 1972 are central to this study. “The (Vietnam War’s) history is constantly evolving, as new evidence emerges, particularly from the other side,” Vietnam War scholar Lien-Hang Nguyen wrote in the New York Times in August 2012. “Since too little attention was paid to understanding the enemy’s motivations, internal dynamics, and foreign relations, we have always had an incomplete and incorrect picture of that war.”

To understand why the periods highlighted here become so important in the context of discussing the conditions for peacemaking, the assumptions and actions of the parties involved in the lead up to these historic periods must be examined – and the history of the Vietnam War offers a lesson in the changing understanding of the

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narrative of past conflicts. Nguyen’s recently published book, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*, contains many revelations through examination of long-sequestered primary source Vietnamese language documents, cables and archival materials. Not only was Nixon arriving in the White House facing difficult decisions about the war – but his opponents in Hanoi were experiencing extreme hardships in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive as well. Through examination of Vietnamese language documents and other sources, Nguyen and others have gradually determined Nixon’s canny strategic view on the conflict was an unwelcome development for the North Vietnamese communists’ goals. The leadership of the Vietnamese Workers Party (VWP), General Secretary Le Duan and his deputy Le Duc Tho (the principal architects of communist North Vietnam’s war for reunification) now confronted their equals in Nixon and Kissinger in the wake of Johnson’s downfall. Nixon’s approach to the conflict was vastly different from the vacillating and incremental approach of the Johnson Administration, and complicated planning for victory. “Like the ‘comrades Le,’ the two American leaders used (the Nixon Administration’s) first year in office to consolidate decision making in their hands,” Nguyen notes.  


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ways, this was the perfect foil to the thinking of their counterparts Le Duan and Le Duc Tho.\textsuperscript{15}

It is in this leadership dynamic where one of the conventional assumptions about the Vietnam War’s conduct from the communist side comes undone – as most Western scholarship has held that the war was conducted by a unified, disciplined communist effort directed from Hanoi and aided and abetted by their auxiliaries in South Vietnam. Le Duan and Le Duc Tho have largely escaped the scrutiny of more famous figures, such as Ho Chi Minh, but their impact on the war and the Cold War fate of Southeast Asia cannot be underscored. While Tho would become known to the world in later years as Kissinger’s partner in negotiating the Paris Accords, Le Duan is perhaps the most influential figure of the war’s most violent period. His faction of the party wound up triumphing during internal power struggles through the war’s early years, and Le Duan’s decisions and actions directly led to the conflict’s escalation in a final bid to end the “war for peace” in Vietnam, according to Nguyen’s findings.\textsuperscript{16}

Both men served together in Vietnam’s volatile south in the years preceding the Second World War as anti-colonial revolutionaries, and during Vietnam’s war for independence from the French. Le Duan rose through the ranks to become the VWPs first secretary from 1960 to his death in 1986 – the longest running period for any official to hold this position in modern Vietnamese history. As such, the bland,

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 2-3.
uncharismatic Le Duan became the architect, main strategist and commander-in-chief of the communist war effort – not Ho Chi Minh, nor famed military strategist and hero of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu Vo Nguyen Giap, as is widely perceived in the West. Le Duan and Tho worked to effectively marginalize the aging Ho in the aftermath of the 1954 Geneva Accords, the agreement which split Vietnam in two, as the division of the country proved extremely controversial within the VWP. Le Duan and Tho brought focus, administrative skill and political will to their quest that other leaders in the VWP did not possess in the volatile war years, Nguyen writes.\(^\text{17}\)

It was the steely revolutionary ethos of the “comrades Le” faction of the VWP that pushed for offensive operations, rather than gradual political-military gains, especially in the years following the 1954 partition of the country. Le Duan and his allies – in contrast to the more practical perspectives of Ho and Giap – considered diplomacy the least promising of the three modes of struggle. The three modes of revolutionary struggle per the VWP were military, political struggle through organizing and propaganda efforts, and diplomatic initiatives. Following the Johnson Administration’s escalation to direct military involvement in the conflict, the VWP kicked off its war effort under the banner of the “Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation” (in Vietnamese, \textit{cuoc khang chien chong my cuu nuoc}), which encompassed all three fronts.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{18}\) Asselin, \textit{A Bitter Peace}, 2.
The goals of the Vietnamese revolution, according to Le Duan and his allies, involved liberating the South, building a strong socialist state in the North and working to unite the country. Due to the nature of these objectives, Le Duan believed, decisive victory on the battlefield over the Saigon government and their American backers was the preferred path – as diplomacy in the aftermath of French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 led to partition in Geneva. “After 1965, the VWP politburo intended not to repeat the mistake… by negotiating an end to a war it could win through sufficient sacrifice and continued effort,” scholar Pierre Asselin notes.\(^\text{19}\) This was the context from the Vietnamese communist perspective under Johnson’s expansion, and as the conflict ratcheted up, so did fighting, as the North (like Johnson) saw no need for negotiation.

Escalation on both sides of the conflict occurred because of assumptions made which did not materialize – laying the groundwork for the war’s eventual pivot in 1968. Le Duan, unlike Johnson, was prepared to gamble with higher stakes in order to achieve victory and consolidate power. At the core of his militancy lay a Maoist concept he pushed via his rise to power in the VWP – the General Offensive and General Uprising (GO-GU). This strategy required dramatic large scale attacks by “revolutionary forces” that would spark a mass political uprising, with communist sympathizers fighting alongside regular PAVN troops, and toppling a fragile South

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 3.
Vietnamese government still reeling from the coup and assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963.\textsuperscript{20}

Le Duan believed this strategy, adopted by the VWP’s executive leadership in December 1963, was the only path to certain victory as VWP records reveal he was buoyed by reports from South Vietnam that the “political strength of the masses” was at an all time high. A major buildup and uprising would bring the war to a speedy end, before the U.S. could decisively intervene. However, the gamble failed – despite military victories against South Vietnamese forces trained and assisted by U.S. advisors, and the Saigon regime remained in place. Johnson had expanded the war in the aftermath of the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident involving an attack by North Vietnamese patrol boats on the U.S.S. Maddox. By early 1965, communist attacks on U.S. forces in South Vietnam, such as the Pleiku barracks incident in February 1965, gave Johnson a green light for escalation – and by March U.S. marines landed on the beaches at Da Nang. Though the strategy had failed to topple the RVN leadership, Le Duan held fast to his ambitious military plans for victory. In spite of the unwelcome intervention of U.S. troops, the GO-GU strategy would return in the war’s seminal moment in 1968, known to the Vietnamese as \textit{Tet Mau Than} – and to the world as the Tet Offensive.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 65.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 64, 74-75.
The years leading up to the 1968 offensive were marked with incremental troop increases and a gradual sense of stalemate – while U.S. military officials claimed their search-and-destroy tactics against communist guerillas in the South were making progress. Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year celebration, arrived on January 30-31, 1968, with a roar – as a coordinated attack by PAVN troops, Vietcong guerillas and sympathizers launched against 36 provincial capitals across the South, five autonomous cities, and 64 district capitals. The sweeping assault, however, did not produce the desired strategic effect – as communist forces were only able to hold the former imperial capital of Hue through Feb. 24, 1968. Uprisings in the urban centers across the South did not materialize and the forces in the first waves were defeated and pushed back.\textsuperscript{22}

Even with these setbacks, the offensive had effects that sent shockwaves through the Johnson Administration – as it flew in the face of U.S. military assessments of the conflict. “The fact that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army could mount a coordinated assault on most of the major towns and military installations across South Vietnam gravely undermined the optimistic assessments (Army Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV)) had been retailing for many months,” Sorley notes – thus, the U.S. government’s credibility was severely damaged. The offensive, however, carried a severe cost for the North Vietnamese and their allies – as estimates later compiled revealed that 45,000 enemy fighters were killed or wounded severely, a figure which

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 113.
amounted to nearly 20 percent of the total communist forces in the South, with more than 33,000 killed in combat. The losses would permanently change the military options available to the VWP in prosecution of the war for years to come. Anticipating Le Duan’s uprising, many guerilla cadres who had previously been operating undercover came out of hiding, only to be killed or identified and tracked down later by RVN forces. The Vietcong, the primary guerilla force in the south seeking to topple the Saigon regime, never recovered from these losses militarily. As a result, this forced the North to rethink how it would accomplish its goals militarily.23

The aftermath of Tet 1968, aside from the shock it created in the American public’s perception of the war, had a discernable effect across South Vietnam as well – and not one Le Duan had anticipated. The offensive, which brought the war into the urban areas of Hue, Saigon and other locales, directly exposed the hazards of “real war” to city-dwelling Vietnamese for the first time, recalled RVN Army Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong – one of South Vietnam’s most well regarded military commanders.24 The assault, which included the massacre of civilians in Hue, changed the outlook of a significant portion of the population of the South – and rather than inspiring an uprising, provoked general mobilization in support of the RVN government. The shift in public opinion enabled the Saigon government to decree a full mobilization of military-age males, something it did not attempt previously, enlisting 19 to 38 year old males.

23 Sorley, A Better War, 13-14.

24 Ibid., 14
men as opposed to a far narrower segment of the population previously. The RVN military forces eventually expanded from 600,000 strong to 1,100,000 – with the June 1968 RVN mobilization law drafted specifically so volunteers could serve in regional forces or popular forces, instead of the regular military. This change allowed volunteers to serve in positions closer to their homes and regions. The offensive had provoked not support of Northern communists, but mobilization against them, historian Sorley points out.25

The violence and casualties of Tet 1968 smashed assumptions on both sides of the Pacific Ocean, history has revealed – as the communists and their allies in the National Liberation Front (NLF, another name for the Vietcong) confronted the reality that conditions were not aligned to topple the RVN government in Saigon through military force. “Although Hanoi and the NLF scored important psychological gains over Washington and Saigon, their casualties were nearly ten times as high (as RVN and US military losses),” concludes historian Pierre Asselin. In the U.S., the offensive’s mere execution made the claim that American forces were on the verge of defeating their foes in Southeast Asia lack credibility.26

Even though Le Duan agreed to talks with the U.S. after Johnson’s March 31, 1968 speech in which the embattled U.S. president declared he would not run for re-election, the communist leader still believed that the military aspect of his “talking

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25 Sorley, A Better War, 15.

26 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 5.
while fighting” strategy (đáy va đaṇh in Vietnamese) could prevail. Hence, Le Duan authorized a second wave of attacks in May – again resulting in high casualties and a failure to spark a general uprising. A week after the failed secondary offensive, American and North Vietnamese representatives met privately to begin preliminary discussions. These talks would forever alter the nature of the war going forward by forcing the parties to redefine victory, from one resulting from a military conquest to one where a favorable political settlement could be reached at a negotiating table. North Vietnamese diplomat-scholar Luu Van Loi, who later advised Le Duc Tho in the Paris negotiations of 1972, noted that this period after Tet 1968 marked the beginning of a “new war” from the North’s perspective – where a battle around a “green carpet” would be waged while “bombs were still exploding on the battlefield.” This phase of the war would intensify with the start of the Nixon Administration in 1969, as dissent within the North’s politburo would mount and Le Duan’s rivals, including the now vindicated Giap, would push for more emphasis on negotiation. The leadership of the North had no choice but to advance the “diplomatic struggle” in Paris – as the political-military struggle of their allies in South Vietnam had been severely weakened in the aftermath of 1968’s Tet Offensive. The RVN’s military, along with American bombs

27 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 114-115.

28 Ibid., 115.

29 Ibid.
and aircraft, were taking a toll on PAVN and Vietcong forces in a turn of events that Le Duan did not foresee or anticipate.\textsuperscript{30} The assumption regarding the health of the Saigon regime proved faulty, and the pursuit of military victory and revolt to produce a decisive end to the war proved costly for the North – and the arrival of Nixon, his reorientation of assumptions and policies to further American interests – would lay the groundwork for the decisive events of 1972.

The story of the later years of the Vietnam War, and the events which paved the way to the Paris Accords, is an instructive tale in how critical assumptions by leadership on all sides, and the actions resulting from those assumptions, play a key role in determining the outcomes in war. The state of political and military affairs in a given conflict can shift over time, and per Luu Van Loi’s observations above about talks in the wake of Tet 1968, the nature of a war – and the instruments used to prosecute it – can be changed or altered significantly in short time. This is important to remember when listening to casual comparisons about the conduct of the Vietnam War versus America’s war in Afghanistan – much depends on the place and timeframe of a conflict, as the military, political and diplomatic balance can shift significantly in the course of months and even weeks. It is, therefore, prudent to examine the assumptions and resulting actions concerning America’s war in Afghanistan prior to President Barack Obama’s “surge” expansion from 2009 to 2012.

\textsuperscript{30} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 130.
To understand the shifting assumptions and actions surrounding the conduct of America’s seven years in Afghanistan predating Obama’s inheritance of the conflict, we must examine the U.S. views towards two important factions. The first is the disposition of the Taliban movement (the government of Afghanistan prior to the U.S. invasion of October 2001) and its allies in the al Qaeda organization. The second is the perception of Hamid Karzai and his allies – the man who would aid America in its initial invasion, and would become the president of Afghanistan and key ally in the conflict against the Taliban.

Afghanistan’s recent history before late 2001 is one of war and brutality, particularly in the aftermath of the disastrous Soviet invasion and occupation of the country from 1979 to 1989. A Soviet-backed ruler, Mohammed Najibullah, ruled until the downfall of the Soviet Union resulted in the cessation of economic and military aid to Afghanistan – and in April 1992 he was forced out of power, as warlords and tribes battled his government and each other. Kabul, a city mostly untouched by war in the Soviet period, was bombarded with rockets and artillery by the militia of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, seeking to displace the coalition government of Burhanuddhin Rabbani, a noted leader of the anti-Soviet resistance, who had succeeded Najibullah. It was in this environment, competition among warlords, ethnic factions, and descent into civil war, in which the Taliban saw their opening.  

While America’s interest in Afghan affairs would wane as the Cold War ended, it would be the Taliban movement, a grouping of Sunni Muslim religious radicals from Afghanistan’s volatile southern provinces, which would rise up amidst the anarchy of the post-Soviet period with great consequence for the country’s future. As RAND analyst and Afghanistan scholar Seth Jones explained in a study of America’s involvement in Afghanistan, the members of the movement came from religious schools established in Pakistan in the 1980s – their goals in Afghanistan were to restore peace; enforce strict sharia law, religiously guided edicts rather than secular ones; and defend the “integrity and Islamic character of Afghanistan.” The Taliban’s name is drawn from the movement’s background as religious students, or talibs – those who seek knowledge. According to Jones, “the early Taliban were deeply disillusioned with the factionalism and criminal activities of the Afghan (warlords and mujahideen, those who fought the Soviets)… They saw themselves as the cleansers of a war gone astray and a social and political system that had become derailed.”

It was these views that attracted a degree of support across various sectors of Afghan life – even as their methods were brutal and harsh, particularly their treatment of women and other ethnic minorities in Afghanistan. Through intimidation, co-option and targeted violence and assassination, the Taliban slowly consolidated power across the country’s tribal groups and power players. “War weary Afghans initially welcomed the Taliban,” Jones notes. Many Afghans, particularly members of the country’s

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32 Ibid., 87-88.
Pashtun ethnic group – long the dominant faction of the country’s patchwork of ethnicities – saw the group as a needed force for peace and stability, led by the one-eyed cleric Mullah Mohammed Omar, the movement’s spiritual leader. Their efforts also attracted the support of another band of extremists – the Saudi extremist organization al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri. Indeed in the group’s own writings, al Zawahiri refers to Mullah Omar favorably as “commander of the faithful” and defender of true Muslims.\(^{33}\) It is this tie between the two movements, which leads to bin Laden’s arrival in Afghanistan in 1996, where he established the country as his organization’s base of operations. This action cemented the appearance of a close relationship between the Taliban government of the country, unrecognized by the U.S. and many other countries by the late 1990s, and the al Qaeda organization. Following the al Qaeda terrorist attacks against U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, official U.S. classified assessments showed that the bond between Mullah Omar and bin Laden was tightening, not fraying. One State Department official noted in a cable that the Taliban leader had lashed out at the U.S. in response to suggestions Mullah Omar should expel the terror leader from Afghanistan – and the relationship with al Qaeda soured relations with the Taliban’s one time supporter, the government of Saudi Arabia.\(^{34}\)

\(^{33}\) Jones, *Graveyard of Empires*, 84, 90.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 113.
While the U.S. attempted to target bin Laden’s organization, al Qaeda enjoyed sanctuary in Afghanistan – as it prosecuted attacks against U.S. interests from 1998 to 2001 in Africa and Yemen, and planned the September 2001 attacks, which would drastically alter the fate of their Taliban patrons. It is this association, built up over the course of the late 1990s, which caused U.S. decision makers to argue in the wake of the attacks that al Qaeda and the Taliban were inseparable organizations, with Mullah Omar at the very least aiding and abetting bin Laden’s activities. This assumption would be revisited years later, before the Afghan “surge.”

In the aftermath of the carnage in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the world again became fixated on Afghanistan and its Taliban rulers – as the administration of President George W. Bush portrayed the linkage between Osama bin Laden’s activities and the Taliban as one of close cooperation and support. For example, in an address to a joint session of Congress nine days after the attack, Bush stated that the leadership of al Qaeda had “great influence” in Afghanistan, and supported the Taliban in its efforts to control and subdue the country, and in turn received aid and shelter from the Taliban. “In Afghanistan, we see al Qaeda’s vision for the world,” Bush declared, before announcing the beginning of the so-called “War
on Terror” – calling on the Taliban government to hand over bin Laden unconditionally.35

The day following Bush’s speech, the Taliban’s ambassador to Pakistan, Abdul Salaam Zaeef, told the press at a meeting in Islamabad, Pakistan, that the U.S. had not made a convincing case on bin Laden’s complicity in the attack, saying “no evidence and proof” was forthcoming. “We’re not prepared to give up Osama bin Laden,” he added.36 On October 7, 2001, the U.S. and its allies initiated bombing attacks against the Taliban government’s limited air defenses and communications infrastructure in Afghanistan. The initial bombardment was followed by a ground assault of U.S. Special Forces and tribal militias allied against the Taliban, which attacked regime strongholds. These actions marked the initiation of the U.S. invasion, Operation Enduring Freedom, the code name for the combat operations in the country against al Qaeda elements and the Taliban, which continue to this day.37

Conscious of the legacy of the Soviet invasion, U.S. leaders wanted to keep a small footprint of military forces in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the start of military operations – and sought out indigenous allies to bolster legitimacy in their


37 Jones, Graveyard of Empires, 121.
attempt to dislodge the Taliban and al Qaeda. In the days after the invasion, it would be Hamid Karzai – a Poplazi Pashtun from the Afghan city of Kandahar – who would aid America in its quest to topple the Taliban. Karzai would serve as America’s main ally – and frequent policy foil – in the coming years. Karzai was born in Kandahar in 1957, educated in India, and spent much of the Soviet occupation living in Pakistan – and returned after the fall of Najibullah to aid the Rabbani government in rebuilding the country. But instead, civil war and chaos consumed the country, and Karzai, with the help of an enemy-to-be (Hekmatyar), escaped back into Pakistan as the country crumbled.38

By the mid-nineties, Karzai – like many of his fellow Pashtuns – initially supported the Taliban in their quest to restore order to a nation descending into anarchy, even considering becoming an ambassador for the new government in Kabul. But after witnessing the brutality of the Taliban, he reached out to form alliances with other leaders in the country – such as the famed Tajik leader Ahmed Shah Massoud (who was killed by al Qaeda assassins two days prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks) – and toured world capitals seeking support. But his efforts succeeded mainly in building goodwill, not materiel support. While Karzai did not succeed in gaining the political and financial backing he wanted, he did build a reputation with governments as diverse as the Iranians, the Russians and the U.S., as a moderate leader interested in reconciliation in Afghanistan. It was his charm and effective public relations skills

38 Chandrasekaran, Little America, 83.
which the U.S. turned to in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks, when he returned to Afghanistan to build a coalition of tribal leaders opposed to the Taliban – assisted by U.S. special forces and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives.  

It is the perception of Karzai’s legitimacy amongst Afghans (and the shifting relationship with U.S. officials) that contributed to assumptions driving U.S policy in the year after the invasion – and later in 2009 to 2012. Karzai’s father was chief of the Poplazi tribe until his assassination in 1999 by agents of the Taliban, and the tribal network was very influential in southern Afghanistan. By the time Karzai returned to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, he had consolidated a good deal of support amongst his fellow tribesmen to organize against the Taliban, with assistance from the U.S. As the Taliban crumbled, by December of 2001 the attention of the international community and of leaders in Afghanistan turned to rebuilding the country. By the aftermath of the first Bonn Conference in Germany in November 2001, Karzai found himself head of a 30-member acting administration, alongside other elements of governance established by a collection of leaders – including a supreme court, and a special commission for the convening of an emergency loya jirga – or a traditional tribal and religious leadership gathering in Afghanistan.

Nonetheless, his effusive public relations efforts, notes journalist and experienced Afghanistan and Pakistan correspondent Rajiv Chandrasekaran, heavily

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39 Ibid., 84-85.

40 Jones, Graveyard of Empires, 123-124.
influenced the U.S. perception of Karzai: “He reached out to powerful warlords, pledging to include their representatives in his government, not to hold them accountable for the violence of the rough and tumble years after the Soviets fell.” This was a strategy “born of desperation” rather than legitimacy, however, as Karzai lacked a militia of his own to stand up to the warlords. This would affect his actions and approaches to governing in the years to come, as he was reliant on U.S. military power, not just in his efforts to topple the Taliban. Chandrasekaran notes, in the immediate years after the invasion, the Bush Administration – caught up in preparing for its Iraq war – neglected to support Karzai’s fledgling government with troops and military support when requested. The U.S. directed funding not through the United Nations and the fledgling Afghan government but through development contractors and non-government organizations.\footnote{Chandrasekaran, \textit{Little America}, 85-86.} Despite its preparations for Iraq, Bush gave public indication the United States would give long term assistance to the Afghan government. In an April 2002 speech at the Virginia Military Institute – the alma mater of the great soldier-statesman George Marshall – Bush touted his commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan, words which Karzai and those around him took at face value. “True peace will only be achieved when we give the Afghan people the means to achieve their own aspirations,” Bush said, invoking Marshall’s legacy in building the post-World War II reconstruction plan that bore his name.\footnote{Jones, \textit{Graveyard of Empires}, 146.}
In the years which followed, the U.S. scaled back its presence in the country, however, as attention did indeed turn to Iraq – revealing yet another faulty assumption which would affect the nature of the Afghan conflict’s later years: the Taliban, now out of power, were vanquished in the eyes of the Bush Administration. This proved disastrously wrong. By the summer of 2002, Taliban commanders began slipping back into Afghanistan’s southern provinces – attempting to reconnect with old comrades. While Taliban fighters received poor receptions in some areas where they had fewer tribal allies, they caught sympathetic ears in areas such as Helmand Province, due to the abuses and excesses of Karzai-appointed officials and doubts about the presence of U.S. troops in the country. “It wasn’t that people there had fond memories of their brutal reign,” Chandrasekaran notes – but the Taliban were fond of noting that corruption and abuse of power were not tolerated under their theocratic governance, and this message would resonate with a steadily growing portion of the Afghan population. This trend would have drastic implications for the war’s conduct and composition in years to come – especially by the time Barack Obama’s presidency would begin in 2009.\footnote{Chandrasekaran, Little America, 44.}

The history of these two wars have revealed that assumptions have a great deal to do with courses of action sought out by leaders on all sides – and in the study of the later years of the Vietnam War and the American experience in Afghanistan, this is borne out. Even today, as the Afghan conflict grinds on, scholars and analysts note key strategic assumptions and courses of action may have already determined how
successful the United States will be in seeking a negotiated settlement as Nixon did in
Paris. Some analysts suggest the opportunity has already been squandered in
Afghanistan. In one National Defense University essay on strategy in the Afghan war,
Marine Corps Lt. Col. Mark Schrecker wrote that the objectives of a successful foreign
policy strategy must be built so that their achievement creates a “strategic effect”
which supports a certain national interest.44

Schrecker’s treatment of the decision-making process leading up to the Obama
military surge of 2009 is highly critical, yet his words could easily be applied to the
problems Nixon, Kissinger – and their counterparts, the “comrades Le” – faced as 1972
approached. Both sides then sought a credible negotiated settlement for their own ends
in the Vietnam conflict. “A strategy that successfully achieves its given objectives but
fails to support the associated national interest is at best a waste of resources and
national power and, at worst, a threat to the national security of the country,” Schrecker
writes.45

For Nixon and Kissinger, forging the conditions of reconciliation in Vietnam in
1972 would prove a far from peaceful task. As the next chapter points out, diplomacy,

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44 Lt. Col. Mark Schrecker (USMC) “United States Strategy in Afghanistan: Flawed
Assumptions Will Lead to Ultimate Failure,” (long version unpublished essay submitted in Core Course
6400, The Domestic Context and U.S. National Security Decision Making, National Defense University,
April, 2010), 2; An edited version of this paper is also available as “U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan:
Flawed Assumptions Will Lead to Ultimate Failure,” Joint Forces Quarterly, no. 59 (Fourth Quarter
2010): 75-82.

45 Ibid.
military action and key assumptions would align by the end of this pivotal year – and
create an opening for a settlement in the midst of a still raging war.
CHAPTER II:
THE PENULTIMATE ACT: RICHARD NIXON’S PURSUIT OF “PEACE WITH HONOR”

This thesis is built on the examination of diplomatic and military events during two periods in two different conflicts – the first being the events of the year 1972 in America’s war in Vietnam, and the circumstances which made them possible. Chapter I established that many of the events, policies and actions leading to the later years of the Vietnam War were crucial in shaping perceptions about the ideas of victory and the possibility of achieving negotiated settlement of the war on all sides. The assumptions underpinning actions by the U.S., the North Vietnamese communists and America’s allies in the government of South Vietnam are also critical to understanding this period of history. This chapter aims to explore the assumptions, conditions and actions that unfolded in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive in 1968 – setting the stage for the year 1972 – the decisive events preceding the suspension of the Linebacker II bombings of December 1972, and the return to the Paris Peace Talks. The scope of this chapter will illustrate critical events and decisions, which shaped an opening for a historic negotiated settlement between the U.S. and North Vietnam. This chapter is organized in four main sections, first exploring the background of events following Tet and why they conspired to make 1972 such a decisive period in the war. Second, the key conditions and assumptions of North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the United States in this period will be examined, then the military and diplomatic actions of all sides will be illustrated as well as the results they aimed to achieve. Lastly, the results of these
actions by the end of 1972 will be presented, and these results will be compared with the assumptions that drove them – and examine whether they proved accurate or not.

For background, it is important to understand the Vietnam War would irrevocably shift in character in the aftermath of Tet 1968 and the arrival of Nixon in the White House in early 1969. Several scholars, such as Sorley, note the events of the 1968 Tet Offensive achieved global notoriety – and vastly changed the calculus on the conflict for all parties. Not only did the military failure of Tet 1968 influence strategic choices in Hanoi (as illustrated in Chapter I), but also the arrival of a new American president greatly influenced the set conditions for the events of 1972. When Nixon assumed leadership of America’s efforts in Vietnam, a shift in perspective, assumptions and strategies occurred both in diplomacy and military affairs, which would lead to the decisive events of 1972. The results of this shift, and how the results reflected on assumptions made about the state of the war and the conditions for peace – in Hanoi, in Saigon and in Washington D.C – would prove momentous.

In addition to the change in leadership in the White House, key members of the U.S. national security team gained prominence in the aftermath of Tet 1968. First, Army Gen. Creighton Abrams replaced Westmoreland as the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam by June 1968 – and was complimented by U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker, who was appointed to the position by Johnson in 1967 but remained in the job through 1973. Both Abrams and Bunker saw the war in a more holistic manner than Westmoreland and the Johnson Administration writ large,
believing political progress in the RVN government was just as important as military progress on the battlefield. The legitimacy of South Vietnamese governance and its ability to protect itself and its citizens, Bunker believed, was crucial to American aims in the conflict. Abrams noted in early 1969 that the North Vietnamese had exploited Johnson’s willingness to negotiate from a position of relative weakness in late 1968, in the waning days of his presidency, and that the U.S. and its allies in Saigon had received little indication these talks would achieve meaningful results. Specifically, Johnson had offered a cessation in American bombing if the North did not “take advantage” of the pause to increase infiltration, attack cities or violate the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between the North and South. Abrams called this a “scam” and pointed to the attacks mounted against cities in February 1969 (barely a month after Nixon’s inauguration, known as “Tet 1969”), as evidence the “understandings” sought in earlier talks had no basis in reality.¹

Bunker also realized in the aftermath of Tet 1968 that the strategic calculus of the conflict had changed. The U.S. needed to recognize this in any attempt to pursue a negotiated settlement that would be favorable to American terms. “The talks are going to be complex, and difficult, and long, and arduous,” he said. “And I don’t think we’re going to reach conclusions easily or quickly.” Bunker recognized, in the aftermath of the violence of Tet 1968 and the swell of support for the RVN’s anti-communist activities in the South, this would give the U.S. more time to develop the capabilities of

its ally in Saigon, both the country’s military strength and more importantly its political stability. In effect, the war had become even more of a political struggle between Saigon and Hanoi. Bunker noted, in conversations he had with RVN President Nguyen Van Thieu in mid 1968, the embattled South Vietnamese leader could now talk about something other than military victory, since the Vietcong and their allies in the North had been bloodied on the battlefield after Tet 1968. The confidence of Thieu in his government and military would prove a critical factor in America’s pursuit of peace in Vietnam. “(Thieu) can talk about the fact that there has to be a political settlement sometime, and that the context will change from military to political,” Bunker noted.  

If Johnson’s approach had sought military victory through the mass infusion of U.S. ground combat forces and vacillating use of military airpower, Nixon’s approach proved far cannier, and perceptive of the motivations of America’s communist foes – and his ally in Saigon. In remarks given at a June 1972 news conference, by then in the midst of negotiations with the North Vietnamese over ending American involvement in the war, he gave insight into why he felt Johnson had erred in Southeast Asia. He referred to North Vietnam’s leaders as “very pragmatic men,” adding he truly believed that they “respect strength, not belligerence but strength; and at least that is the way I am always going to approach it, and I think it is going to be successful in the end.” Before the 1968 election, in an effort to get the North to the negotiating table, Johnson had suspended the American bombing effort known as “Rolling Thunder” when talks

\[2\] Ibid., 109.
began. As Vietnam scholar Pierre Asselin notes in his study of the Paris Talks, Nixon continued to bomb the North even during negotiations – in a parallel to the perceptions noted in Chapter One by Luu Van Loi on the North’s efforts to negotiate while fighting. Nixon truly believed, coming into office, he needed to increase pressure on Hanoi in order to get concessions at the negotiating table – as it was crucial to assuring both his allies in the RVN and his political constituency in America. Kissinger recalled years later, Nixon didn’t really desire much progress in negotiating after the November 1968 election – and the leadership of North Vietnam was caught off guard by his determination to apply airpower and other limited military actions as levers to influence talks. Nixon ideas about military force and negotiation would serve his and Kissinger’s interests in forming terms of a settlement by the end of 1972.\(^3\)

Today, decades removed from the deliberations that preceded the Paris Agreement of 1973, the conditions and assumptions of Nixon and his advisors are better understood than at any previous time since the end of the Vietnam War. In the past decade alone, historians and researchers have gained access to volumes of previously sealed records, tapes, transcripts and memoranda of the Nixon Administration and Nixon’s private policy deliberations, helping to piece together a more definitive understanding of how he managed to navigate the U.S. to a peace agreement with the North. This thesis utilizes some of these materials, particularly

materials relevant to the 1972 Paris Negotiations and the decision-making and deliberations behind talks and the Linebacker bombing campaigns.4

It is clear even before his election, Nixon had designs on how to extract America from Vietnam. In the aftermath of Tet 1968, Nixon knew he had to set the conditions for American disengagement from the war in Southeast Asia, and even prior to his inauguration tipped his hand in private to the three main instruments he would pursue to this end – what would become known as “Vietnamization,” linking superpower diplomacy to the war in Vietnam, and the threat of the use of overwhelming force, via aerial bombing. Historian Jeffrey Kimball notes, in a closed-door off the record conversation with conservative delegates to the August 1968 Republican National Convention, how Nixon laid out this strategy. “The moment we say the war is lost, you are not going to be able to negotiate,” he said in assurances to delegates about the war. Nixon referenced his time serving in the Eisenhower Administration during the Korean War, and how he truly believed that Eisenhower’s use of diplomatic messaging to the Chinese and North Koreans that he would not let a “continual ground war of attrition” continue helped end that conflict. Eisenhower even used the insinuated threat of the use of nuclear weapons, Nixon noted. The U.S. must

4 Author’s note: This study cites documents, text and recordings from the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California – the repository for the National Archives’ Nixon presidential materials. Documents cited directly from this collection in the footnotes will be indicated by “Nixon Library, National Archives” on first reference and “NL,NA” in further references.
have a “two pronged” position to be “militarily strong and diplomatically strong,” Nixon said according to a tape transcript of the meeting obtained by Kimball.⁵

While victory was not in the cards in Vietnam, precipitous withdrawal was not an option either for Nixon. Much like Abrams’ perspective on the battlefield, Nixon believed the key to getting a favorable settlement in Vietnam was enabling America’s allies in Saigon to stand up to North Vietnamese aggression and some very careful perception management. Nixon emphasized a “massive training program” for the RVN military, to set the stage for a negotiated settlement and improving relations with the Soviet Union, which he called “critical to the settlement of Vietnam” – before ending the talk with an analogy to his poker playing days in the Navy. “When a guy didn’t have the cards, he talked awfully big. But when he had the cards, he just sat there,” Nixon told his delegates. “Now we’ve got the cards… what we’ve got to do is walk softly and carry a big stick and we can have peace in this world. And that is what we are going to do.”⁶

This sentiment, hidden behind closed doors at a political convention just months after the devastation of Tet 1968, would lay the foundation for what would become known as the “Nixon Doctrine” – a policy unveiled during an informal press conference on the U.S. territory of Guam July 25, 1969, a policy which would define U.S. military and diplomatic action in the endgame of the Vietnam War. When a


⁶ Ibid., 64-65.
reporter asked Nixon how America would support its Asian allies who could find themselves under pressure from communist forces, Nixon responded that Asian nations would have the main responsibility for defending themselves from internal and external attacks and threats, except for those involving nuclear weapons. The press dubbed the response the “Guam Doctrine,” until Nixon and Kissinger clarified their points in later months, and it served as the public face of Nixon’s sentiments communicated in private to supporters and advisors during the course of his presidential campaign and afterward.7

Over the coming months of 1969, Nixon’s cabinet would be prodded to begin preparations for American troop withdrawals, crucial for setting the tone for the pursuit of peace – to come about incrementally, depending on factors in the war, in negotiations and how the public reacted. According to a National Security Study Memorandum from the White House dated April 10, 1969, the Department of Defense (DOD) with support from the CIA, would draw up contingency timetables for withdrawals, to cover all aspects of U.S. military and paramilitary activity in South Vietnam. Starting in July, “the highest national priorities” would be directed towards equipping and training the South Vietnamese military. The secret memorandum laid forth proposed dates to mark the completion of the transition from combat roles to

7 Ibid., 82-83.
training and advising, depending on circumstances – December 31, 1970, June 30, 1971, December 31, 1971 and December 31, 1972.\(^8\)

The gradual withdrawal of American ground combat forces from Vietnam would be crucial to the events of 1972 preceding the Paris Accords – as it changed the military calculus Nixon could wield to gain concessions at the bargaining table. Contrary to many assertions in years after the war, Sorley notes in his research that the U.S. military command in Vietnam under Abrams believed the unilateral withdrawal of American forces was wholly acceptable to their aims. He cites a MACV objectives plan in early 1969 that noted the reduction of American forces is required not just to buy time for negotiation but also to compel the RVN to take over primary responsibility for the war.\(^9\) Thus, “Vietnamization” proceeded in earnest in spring and summer of 1969, with Nixon announcing on June 8 that 25,000 of 540,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam would be withdrawn. Nixon later confirmed the number of troops being withdrawn would grow to 150,000 over the next 12 months. Summarily, the U.S. began increased deliveries of military hardware and supplies to the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (AFRVN). By 1970, the South Vietnamese Army was well equipped with small arms and had begun receiving heavy artillery, advanced tanks, armored vehicles, and other weaponry.\(^{10}\) In private, though South Vietnam President

\(^8\) Ibid., 77.


Thieu acceded to Nixon’s strategy publicly at this time, he still sought to preserve his own political survival in the tumultuous environment of the wartime RVN. Referencing Nixon’s statement on Guam just months earlier in a conversation with the U.S. President, Thieu felt the strategy was a “constructive policy.” If the U.S. wanted to get out of Vietnam, he said, the best way to do so would be to help his country grow strong. If the RVN could be given aid to “chase away the aggressor,” Thieu vowed his forces could handle the North – as long as he could make his country stronger politically, militarily and economically.\(^\text{11}\)

Simultaneously, Nixon through Kissinger reached out to renew attempts to negotiate, as they calculated they now had a diplomatic opening. Jean Sainteny, a French official from Vietnam’s colonial period, had contacts with North Vietnamese leadership to include Ho Chi Minh, and served as a back channel to pass messages between Washington D.C. and Hanoi. Kissinger and North Vietnamese diplomats Xuan Thuy and Mai Van Bo met in Sainteny’s Paris apartment on August 4, 1969 to discuss terms for possible settlement. Kissinger communicated Nixon’s conditions for an acceptable peace – recognition of the DMZ, a cease-fire across Vietnam as well as Laos and Cambodia, and an exchange of prisoners. Thuy wanted the Thieu government to relinquish power in Saigon, and a coalition government, including Hanoi’s allies in the South, to take its place – essentially the same stipulations Hanoi had advocated towards the end of the Johnson Administration. However, Kissinger told the communist delegation Nixon was prepared to open another secret channel of regular

\(^{11}\) Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 78.
talks with Hanoi, according to a declassified White House memo of the conversation. In order to show good will in the coming months, Kissinger promised the U.S. would withdraw more forces than previously announced and reduce B-52 tactical air strikes by 10 percent. Nixon would also appoint a “high level emissary” (Kissinger) who would be authorized to negotiate a conclusion to the conflict, the memo reported of the conversation. “The President is prepared to adjust military operations in order to facilitate the negotiations,” Kissinger reportedly communicated to the North Vietnamese delegation.\(^\text{12}\)

Despite the initiation of diplomatic overtures, the war would not end soon by any of the targeted dates for withdrawal as drawn up by Nixon’s national security team, as the demands of the two belligerents (North Vietnam and the U.S.) remained virtually unchanged even after the August 1969 meeting. The North, despite its setbacks, still thought victory was salvageable and reflected this belief in its diplomacy with Kissinger well into 1971. But just as Nixon had insinuated in his campaign comments, the conditions were not yet ripe for negotiation – and he and Kissinger sought to engage diplomatically on multiple fronts while improving their bargaining position. Nixon’s decision to begin withdrawing combat forces would further limit his options in the coming years, but he believed he needed to put North Vietnamese and communist forces on the defensive in South Vietnam – underpinning his assumption

\(^{12}\) Memo; Henry Kissinger to President Nixon; “Meeting in Paris with North Vietnamese,” Aug. 6, 1969; White House Special Files, Memoranda to the President, August 1969: Box 60; NL, NA, Yorba Linda, California.
any agreement could only be favorable from a position of strength. Vietnamization was only one of these initiatives, and on March 17, 1969 the secret bombing of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in “neutral” Cambodia began – partly in retaliation for communist attacks in February, and also to hit supply and logistics nodes which allowed Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops to attack cities in the South. It was also crucial to signaling the other part of Nixon’s strategy – engaging the Soviet Union, demonstrating he could still escalate conflict despite his public statements.\textsuperscript{13}

Responding to requests from Abrams, Nixon saw an opportunity in the Cambodia bombings – calling it a “turning point” in his administration’s conduct of the war and pursuit of peace terms. For the next 14 months off and on, B-52s hit North Vietnamese bases in and around the border region in Cambodia – and U.S. commanders reported back the attacks were highly effective in disrupting logistics, destroying stockpiles and pre-empting enemy action. Vietcong commanders, in later recollections, referred to the onslaught as “the great B-52 deluges” which produced “undiluted psychological terror” amongst guerillas attempting to escape the bombs.\textsuperscript{14}

In April 1970, following a military coup in Cambodia by anti-communists, Nixon decided he needed to send U.S. troops along with the ARVN into Cambodia to rout the forces in and around the so called Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) – what amounted to a headquarters for guerilla forces operating in South Vietnam, and served

\textsuperscript{13} Kimball, \textit{The Vietnam War Files}, 79.

\textsuperscript{14} Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 117, 122.
as Hanoi’s forward presence in the south. Nixon believed he needed to strike a decisive blow against these forces in order to give Vietnamization time to succeed.\textsuperscript{15} Military operations continued until July, in and around the border regions and by the end of the operations U.S. and ARVN officers claimed a modicum of success – citing the performance of South Vietnamese military units and some 11,349 enemy troops killed in action, large stocks of weapons destroyed, and only 638 ARVN killed in action out of over 58,000 troops.\textsuperscript{16} Despite the continuing withdrawal of American forces, Nixon sought to shape conditions of the war to favor American interests – even as the American public reacted with pessimism and protest to his Cambodian bombing and incursion.\textsuperscript{17}

These actions, both the Cambodian military operations and proposals for new secret talks with Hanoi, were part of Nixon and Kissinger’s strategy – shaping conditions and perceptions favorable towards achieving an American exit from Vietnam. Nixon would forcefully defend his actions repeatedly to the American public throughout this process. The Nixon Doctrine received a full-throated defense in what became known as the “Silent Majority” speech, delivered to a national television audience on November 3, 1969. Nixon declared to the American people one of the critical assumptions underpinning his choices and policies in the coming months and

\textsuperscript{15} Kimball, \textit{The Vietnam War Files}, 130.

\textsuperscript{16} Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 210.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 212.
years – American credibility, he argued, would be irreparably harmed by a precipitous withdrawal from Vietnam and abandonment of the RVN, and that his administration had sought to change U.S. policy “on the negotiating front and the battlefront.” In his speech, Nixon took the step of announcing the diplomatic proposals he had offered to the North Vietnamese – which included a cease-fire within a year, free elections under international supervision with communist participation and pledges from Thieu’s government to accept the results. In response, Nixon claimed, Hanoi had refused to budge – with the communists saying the U.S. should leave and displace the Thieu government in Saigon on the way out.\(^\text{18}\)

As part of his strategy to secure U.S. interests in Vietnam and beyond, three principles and understandings would affect diplomatic and military actions in Vietnam – and all of Asia going forward, Nixon vowed in the speech. First, the U.S. will keep all of its treaty commitments in the region (which assured nations such as Thailand, the Philippines and South Korea). Second, the U.S. would also provide a “shield” if a nuclear power (the Soviet Union) threatens the freedom of one of America’s allies. And third, as was under way in South Vietnam, America would furnish “military and economic assistance” when requested, but the nation threatened would bear the primary responsibility of providing manpower for its own defense. “I pledged in my campaign… to end the war in a way that we could win the peace,” Nixon said, echoing

his vow to achieve “peace with honor” in Vietnam. He tied support at home directly to negotiations with the North “I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed. For the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate in Paris.”19

While Nixon and Kissinger sought to assuage the American public while consolidating decision making for their plans to get America out of Vietnam, they also saw the danger posed by Thieu’s regime in Saigon – which had become heavily dependent on American aid and military support. While the world would see South Vietnam as a pliant puppet state in many ways, this assumption is put to rest by examining the historical record now more fully available. It is important to note that public talks including Saigon were conducted simultaneously with the secret bilateral talks between Tho and Kissinger. Thieu was not kept informed of the progress of the secret talks. Thieu’s actions in the aftermath of Nixon’s election, per new research, reveal Nixon’s suspicions bore truth. Starting in 1969, Thieu began to revise his policies when he determined the American government would not always act in South Vietnam’s best interests – despite the Nixon Doctrine. Nixon’s troop withdrawals unsettled Thieu, and as talk of settlement increased, his regime would become more proactive and agitate against his patron’s wishes. “Although the Thieu regime was dependent on the United States to survive, it was an active, and relatively independent

19 Ibid.
agent in the post (Tet 1968) war,” Nguyen wrote on her study of RVN diplomatic relations.20

In power from 1965 to the fall of Saigon in 1975, Thieu’s government would wield the tools of blackmail, stalling and manipulation to shape his country’s destiny and assert a nationalist independence from Washington D.C. which would greatly affect the events immediately preceding the Paris Accords. While Thieu’s government gained greater acceptance in the aftermath of the violence of the Tet Offensive of 1968, he still struggled to build his government’s legitimacy since it was affiliated with landed gentry in rural areas, the affluent urban classes of the cities and powerful military officers. As a result, Thieu had to build coalitions to maintain his power, and had to pay credence to a strong nationalist bent in his governance, as it was not only the communist North which held foreign influence in suspicion. Most of the groups Thieu dealt with politically were not pro Vietcong nor committed to the Saigon government, but were merely “against domination by the communists or the U.S.,” according to one classified DOD assessment from early 1970. Through Thieu’s efforts at accommodation, pacification and deal making with religious sects and regional groups in the RVN, he hoped to gain enough support to solidify his position against

communist infiltration from the north, while using Washington D.C.’s money to build the RVN’s military capabilities.  

As the Nixon Doctrine was articulated publicly, the agents of Thieu’s government were privately pressing Washington for assurance and vetting of any proposed peace – as the state and disposition of communist forces in South Vietnam was a factor in negotiations by this time. Thieu vehemently opposed any agreement leaving communist forces in place in the South, and sought to make his case directly to the American people. Nixon would reject Thieu’s request for a meeting on American soil in Hawaii in early 1969 as talk of settlement grew between the allies – instead meeting him in June 1969 on the isolated island of Midway in the Pacific Ocean. Nixon assured Thieu of military aid in his first term, followed by more economic aid in his second and that the U.S. would insist on mutual troop withdrawal from the South as part of any agreement with North Vietnam – in exchange for understanding that private talks would resume that summer between the U.S. and the North on the future of America’s involvement in Vietnam. Despite his public pronouncements following the awkward meeting, Thieu returned to Saigon determined to enhance his diplomatic strategy. In particular, per memos of the RVN’s Political War Department, Saigon saw benefit in waging a diplomatic war against Hanoi just as Kissinger and Nixon were attempting to leverage China and the Soviet Union against each other to America’s benefit. Thieu saw need to develop a backup plan to assert his independence from the

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American government. RVN technocrats and diplomats pushed hard to align the country more with Taiwan, South Korea and West Germany, as these countries were experiencing similar partitioned experiences in the Cold War. The RVN’s diplomats also sought to establish economic and cultural exchanges with democratic Asian states in order to block communist influence and build South Vietnam’s own international legitimacy.\(^{22}\)

As the calculus of war changed, so did the calculus for settlement – as the North Vietnamese now faced a more complicated war and global political order. As Nixon pressed his foreign agenda, the perspective on these developments from Hanoi was quite pessimistic. Nixon’s strategy had shattered assumptions put forward by Le Duan and his allies that his military pressures would push the Americans from Southeast Asia, clearing a path to Saigon. While Nixon’s new doctrine and military actions did not create conditions for a breakthrough towards a settlement by the end of 1970, his enemies were struggling to press forward for definitive victory. Instead of “fighting while talking,” or merely stalling, Le Duan and his allies were now faced with the reality of a more wily adversary in the Nixon Administration, and as such had to alter assumptions about the frailty of both their enemies in Washington and Saigon. Aid to the RVN, bombing of sanctuaries, the perception of America withdrawing its ground combat forces and increased success by the Thieu Government in its

\(^{22}\) Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 141-142.
pacification of Vietcong cadres in the aftermath of the 1968 and 1969 offensives eroded Hanoi’s ability to push for military victory.\footnote{Ibid., 191.}

It would be diplomacy, just as much if not more so than military actions, which would lay the foundation for the critical events of 1972. In January 1970, the Central Committee of the VWP met and evaluated progress of the war, deciding the resistance in South Vietnam was relying too much on military activity and instead had to increase its diplomatic efforts, along with political activity and armed struggle. Le Duan had consolidated power within the VWP, but his desire for military victory at all costs would be tempered by the success of Nixon’s maneuvering. “Nixon would not acquiesce in Hanoi’s demands as easily as Johnson had done,” Asselin noted of North Vietnam’s calculations and assumptions as the war continued into the 1970s. “As the Tet Offensive had exposed the futility of the Pentagon’s ‘search and destroy’ strategy… developments in 1969 and 1970 made Hanoi realize that victory by military and political means alone might be impossible.”\footnote{Asselin, \textit{A Bitter Peace}, 25.} Hanoi needed to buy time.

The communist North, led by Le Duan and Le Duc Tho’s efforts in Paris, believed all they needed was time, that Nixon’s initiatives could be defeated provided they could rebuild their military strength in the South. But this assumption would be smashed by the other aspect of Nixon and Kissinger’s maneuvering – turning the Cold War powers of communist China and the Soviet Union against each other, in the
process effectively selling out North Vietnam. Both countries had provided aid and military supplies to the North throughout its struggle with the U.S. but the calculus between Hanoi, Beijing and Moscow would change significantly in the aftermath of events occurring far from Vietnam. In early March, 1969 – as Nixon grappled with his plan to bomb Cambodia – Chinese and Soviet troops clashed on the island of Zhenbao (Damansky) in the Ussuri River, a culmination of a long deterioration of relations between the two powers and the first modern military clash between the two communist nations. Through the remainder of 1969, no less than 400 clashes would occur between the border troops of the two nations. “Essentially, Moscow and Beijing were to demonstrate their desire for bettering relations with Washington by selling out Hanoi,” Vietnam scholar Nguyen writes of this period.25

It would be the Soviets who would approach America first, official accounts reveal, as Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Dobrynin emotionally appealed to Kissinger in the aftermath of the clashes, saying that China was “everybody’s problem.” In April, Kissinger told Dobrynin noting if there were not a settlement in Vietnam, “other measures” would be invoked which could jeopardize U.S.-Soviet relations elsewhere in the world. In the aftermath of Hanoi’s agreement to further private talks with the U.S. in 1969, North Vietnamese leaders warned America it would gain little from divisions between the U.S.S.R. and China – but in private, they were working furiously to temper the long term damage to their cause. The clashes

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25 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 136.
between the two communist giants, VWP leaders believed, would lead both countries to more readily entertain thoughts of reconciliation with the U.S. – particularly China in the aftermath of its disastrous Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{26} It would be China, and Nixon’s re opening of contacts with the communist country, which would give the impetus towards dramatic events in 1972 – in Vietnam and in the Cold War global order.

The use of power diplomacy by Nixon and Kissinger – what they dubbed “linkage” – was a way to forward their strategy in the aftermath of their military initiatives in Cambodia that produced limited results towards achieving settlement in Vietnam. This approach also was in direct opposition to Johnson’s assessment of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement, as he had believed China was the power behind Hanoi’s belligerence. Nixon and Kissinger knew better, and understood the North’s revolution to be autonomous but heavily reliant on external support from both China and the Soviet Union to forward its aims of reunification and displacement of the Saigon regime. The internal power struggles between Le Duan and those pursuing a more moderate approach to the revolution also had a Sino-Soviet bias, as more often than not party cadres trained in the Soviet traditions preferred protracted struggle and leveraging diplomacy rather than the Maoist-derived beliefs in general uprising and guerilla warfare above all. Through his efforts at warming relations with the Soviets through \textit{détente}, Nixon believed at worst Hanoi would feel less confident if Washington D.C. was dealing directly with Beijing and Moscow, and at best if the two

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 136-137.
major powers decided they had “bigger fish to fry” Hanoi could be pressured into a settlement acceptable to the U.S.  

Kissinger, who was a professor of diplomatic history by background, understood the historic tension between the Chinese and Vietnamese well – as China was twice an occupier of Vietnam, and several prominent members of the VWP saw Beijing’s hand in the partition of the country in 1954 as a low point in the country’s modern history. In conversation with Cambodian colleagues in 1971, Le Duc Tho recalled the “mistakes” of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in forcing Vietnamese communists to accept less than acceptable terms from the French at the end of the First Indochina War. This historical grudge would rear its head again as Nixon would exploit a diplomatic opening with Beijing. In retrospect after the war, former North Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach said the North recalled all too well what had happened in 1954 when China and France had negotiated “behind the backs of the Indochinese countries” – and this drove the North to vow it would not allow Beijing to “solve the war in Vietnam again” to the detriment of the Vietnamese.

27 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 35.

28 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 224.

29 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 37.
Despite public pronouncements of unrelenting support for the North Vietnamese cause, China’s calculations had vastly shifted since its disputes with the Soviets had flared. Unbeknownst to the Hanoi Politburo, the People’s Republic of China was on the verge of making a diplomatic move at the expense of the communist war effort in Vietnam. China had quietly improved relations with Nixon after January 1970 following talks in Warsaw, Poland. By that December, Mao Zedong had communicated through back channels he desired a meeting with the Nixon Administration as a means of countering the Soviets, and the competition was set in motion.\textsuperscript{30} This diplomatic initiative would offset one of the gravest blunders of Nixon’s efforts to force settlement – his push for the ARVN to mount an offensive to prove Vietnamization’s success, which resulted in the debacle of Operation Lam Son 719 from February to April 1971. Over 17,000 South Vietnamese troops, supported by U.S. aircraft and logistics, pushed into Southern Laos to strike at the PAVN’s Ho Chi Minh trail network. Hanoi, which had received indications early an offensive was in the making, realized the strategic stakes in play – and pushed 22,000 of their best troops into Laos to support their relatively weak Laotian allies, complete with tanks and heavy artillery.\textsuperscript{31}

Thieu sought to prove his strength, and Nixon wanted to move the talks in Paris forward from their stalemated position, but both would wind up disappointed. Despite

\textsuperscript{30}Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 189.

\textsuperscript{31}Kimball, \textit{The Vietnam War Files}, 143.
heavy losses from U.S. aerial attacks, the PAVN inflicted heavy casualties on ARVN forces and pushed Thieu to abandon his planned multi-stage operation by late March. The operation has since been regarded as a tactical defeat for South Vietnam, undermining Nixon’s assumptions about the strength of the ARVN and giving new hope to Hanoi it could make a bid for military victory once it had gained back enough strength. Tellingly of the ratcheting Cold War tensions of the period, per records of diplomacy between the Nixon Administration, China and the Soviets, the criticism of the war’s expansion into Laos was mild. The reasoning for this was Beijing’s desire to move forward on a anticipated Nixon visit to China, and the Soviets indicating they wanted a Nixon meeting with USSR Premier Leonid Brezhnev to move forward on a Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) deal. China did not fully trust the North anymore – perceiving them as being increasingly comfortable with Moscow. As a result, the Chinese thoroughly distrusted the Soviets – who were wielding greater influence in Hanoi through the North’s increased reliance on their military weaponry that had been key to the PAVN’s success in blunting Lam Son 719. By May 1971, roadblocks to SALT talks with the Soviets were being removed, and in secret meetings with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, Kissinger discovered the Chinese placed the withdrawal of American troops from Indochina at the bottom of their priority list, and were favoring better relations with the U.S. instead.  

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32 Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 204, 205, 207.
In July 1971 Nixon publicly addressed the American people to unveil his diplomatic bombshell – he would visit the People’s Republic of China by May of the following year, an announcement that not only made headlines in the U.S. but prompted a thorough re-evaluation of strategy in Hanoi. If a deal was concluded, it would put Thieu in a better position if a cease-fire were in fact part of the terms for peace. Instead, Le Duan pressed only to revamp the goals for negotiation – but hold fast on the demand for Thieu’s removal. At the same time, Thieu’s suspicions of his patrons in Washington D.C. rose with the China news, and he suspected a secret deal was in the works since Chinese expansionism was no longer driving U.S. policy decisions in Vietnam. RVN diplomats worked behind the scenes in the months leading up to Nixon’s visit to prevent the offering of the Saigon government as a sacrificial lamb to peace, even while Thieu himself consolidated power in advance of his November election. Thieu told his advisors after the announcement that “America has been looking for a better mistress and now Nixon has discovered China… Vietnam has become ugly and old.”33 To the North, Le Duan and his allies – flush with the success of their military efforts in Laos – saw that changes in the global order did not bode well for their efforts to reunite the country by force. With warming relations between America, China and now their main supplier the Soviet Union, North Vietnam would turn to military force in 1972 to make one last bid for definitive victory before their one-time patrons could abandon them. The push for victory would set off a rapid series

33 Ibid., 218.
of events, making 1972 a decisive year in the Vietnam War – one that would culminate in the conditions for a reluctant peace between the United States and the North Vietnamese.

In January 1972 Richard Nixon stepped up his efforts to win a negotiated settlement – as it was now the year of his re-election, and little progress had occurred in the secret talks in Paris between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho since 1969. By early 1972, the U.S. had only 95,000 troops still in Indochina, and in an announcement on January 13 Nixon declared by May 1, 1972 this number would fall to 69,000. In an attempt to pressure Hanoi, in his announcement he also disclosed private talks later in the month with the North Vietnamese. Successive withdrawals would follow, in effect carrying out unilateral withdrawal – but the U.S. president still held a powerful card to play, the use of American airpower against North Vietnam in support of Saigon’s military.34

Le Duan and the North’s politburo had other designs in motion though. By January 1972, the VWP had determined it had to “intensify” the military struggle against South Vietnam in the wake of the Laotian incursion of early 1971 to crush Vietnamization and compel the U.S. to seek terms for peace more favorable to Hanoi. At this point, Hanoi held a critical assumption as truth, despite the U.S. diplomatic maneuvering. The RVN military, Hanoi believed, was bloodied from its Laotian

34 Kimball, The Vietnam War Files, 204.
debacle, and with less than 100,000 U.S. troops left in Vietnam, the opportunity was ripe to fundamentally alter the strategic balance of forces in the South and “annihilate a maximum number of enemy forces.” The PAVN, as a result, prepared a general offensive, to be led by tanks, armored vehicles and artillery units, to smash through the DMZ and into the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. While another gambit at forcing the U.S. to abandon Saigon, the attack expressed great confidence in the North’s uniform military forces, and Le Duan’s unyielding belief the South could be beaten into submission by force. Any response from Nixon in the way of aerial bombing would be muted by negative opinion from the Soviets, the VWP rationalized, and the U.S. Congress, which by 1972 had vastly increased its pressure on Nixon to get America out of Southeast Asia.

It was Nixon, however, who would achieve a stunning diplomatic victory first, as he became the first American president to visit the People’s Republic of China from February 21-28, 1972 – feted by PRC officials with tours of the Great Wall, Shanghai and grand banquets. Nixon reaffirmed, in conversation with Zhou Enlai, that the U.S. and China desired peace in Southeast Asia, with Nixon adding the Soviet Union wanted to prolong the war – and issued a careful diplomatic threat that if the North persisted in escalation, the U.S. would have no choice but to close down diplomatic

35 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 38.
channels and respond militarily to aid Saigon. Zhou noted this carefully, telling Nixon to choose friends more wisely in the future.\textsuperscript{36}

Following the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué on March 3, the document that established the reset in China-U.S. relations, Zhou traveled to Hanoi for damage control, where an incensed Le Duan greeted him. Le Duan accused China of saving a “drowning” Nixon by inviting him to China, and predicted Nixon would now hit the North harder as a result of the diplomacy with Beijing. The VWP leader then told Chinese leadership not to betray the Vietnamese again, as they had at the 1954 Geneva Conference, per records from Chinese and Vietnamese archives cited by Nguyen. Zhou, however, did Nixon’s bidding in his visit – telling Le Duan and the senior leadership in Hanoi that they should work toward a negotiated solution rather than military action, as Beijing was aware of preparations under way for an offensive.

Privately, VWP politburo members were distressed by Nixon’s diplomatic coups, and greatly concerned both China and the USSR would cut military aid as relations improved, as a Nixon summit in Moscow for later this year was also in the works. North Vietnam had worked hard to prepare for an offensive, and as such had poured all its resources into planning and preparation. War weariness, as a result, was pervasive across the North, per diplomatic cables between Hanoi and other communist nations at the time.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 241-242.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
The North Vietnamese did not heed Zhou’s advice. On March 30, 1972, the PAVN launched a massive attack with five modernized combat divisions of troops crossing into South Vietnam from multiple points – and though MACV intelligence had detected a buildup, the multiple points of attack caught South Vietnamese defenders off guard. Communist units achieved early victories and imposed heavy casualties on ARVN defenders in the weeks after the attack. Nixon greeted the news with fury; he had worked hard to find a way to reinvigorate negotiations with the advent of the New Year. With the attack, Nixon was buoyed in his will to preserve South Vietnam’s independence despite his difficulty in dealing with Thieu. Nixon and Kissinger, fresh from their diplomatic openings with the Chinese and Soviets, saw the offensive for what it was – an attempt to thwart America’s Cold War bargain driving, and demolish Vietnamization.³⁸ At the same time, they saw in the attack an opportunity to end the war on U.S. terms by turning public opinion against Hanoi. Nixon would help the RVN stop the attack, launch a massive counter strike against the North which would bloody them well enough to concede enough at the negotiating table for a settlement favorable to U.S. terms. Following the attack, Nixon instructed all remaining U.S ground forces in South Vietnam not to engage PAVN units, instead ratcheting up the use of aerial bombing – both against attacking North Vietnamese troops and against strategic targets in North Vietnam.³⁹


³⁹ Ibid.
In the initial weeks after the assault, dubbed in the West as the “Easter Offensive,” bombing did little to hamper the flow of personnel and supplies south, but more important was the diplomatic reactions from Moscow and Beijing. The Chinese issued a standard criticism of the U.S. and the Soviets, more importantly, did not react with outrage to the bombing of their allies – convincing both Kissinger and Nixon that the leadership in Moscow did not want to endanger impending talks and the Moscow Summit for the sake of the North Vietnamese. The Chinese, as well, did not grant Soviet ships access to key Chinese ports in order to transport goods and materiel to North Vietnam in the wake of the PAVN assault – saying they could not trust the Soviets. Détente was taking a toll on Hanoi as 1972 wore on.40

Despite the attack, Nixon would not yet raise the stakes and authorize American bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong harbor in the North until Kissinger’s talks with Le Duc Tho in Paris had reached an impasse. On May 2, 1972, a meeting between the two in Paris proved fruitless, and after returning to Washington, both Kissinger and Nixon decided a massive shock was the only way to get the North Vietnamese to deal fairly. Army Maj. Gen. Alexander Haig, Kissinger’s military assistant, presented a plan calling for the bombing of all military targets in North Vietnam, while also mining ports to prevent resupply. Nixon supported it, and on May 4, 1972 ordered the military chiefs to draw up plans, which became Operation Linebacker – an aerial interdiction

40 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 252.
and bombing campaign which would continue until October, and a broad escalation of the war against the North.\textsuperscript{41}

Nixon would again turn to the bully pulpit to further his push for a settlement. In a May 8, 1972 televised address he announced the start of Linebacker as a response to the North’s aggression – and publicly announced new diplomatic initiatives for Hanoi to consider. The U.S. would accept a cease-fire in Vietnam as a precondition for military withdrawal – removing its forces from the South without the North being compelled to do the same (a condition which Thieu had long opposed). Settlement stipulations were broken down into three terms – the return of all U.S. prisoners held by the North; an internationally supervised cease-fire throughout Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos would take effect; and once these terms were satisfied the U.S. would cease bombing and complete a withdrawal in six months. At the same time, Nixon declared he would not allow a communist government in South Vietnam to take hold, nor leave the South to face an assault without support by unilaterally withdrawing American forces. He also publicly appealed to Beijing and Moscow to exert pressure on their ostensible allies. “Hanoi must be denied the weapons and supplies it needs to continue the aggression,” Nixon declared, carefully declaring his terms and actions were not directed at “any other nation.” Appealing directly to Americans critical of his continued involvement in Vietnam, Nixon addressed them directly: “You want peace, I

\textsuperscript{41} Clodfelter, \textit{The Limits of Airpower}, 157.
want peace… But you also want honor and not defeat” – not a false peace prelude to more violence.42

It was a gamble for Nixon to escalate drastically, as it risked his diplomatic progress with China and the USSR. The gamble, however, worked especially with the Soviets as Brezhnev decided he had invested too much in the upcoming summit with Nixon – and sought to answer China’s diplomatic entreaties to the United States. Hence, American commanders were given broad leeway in planning strikes against North Vietnam, as the fear of Soviet and Chinese intervention by summer of 1972 had all but disappeared.43 As a result, American warplanes pounded the PAVN from the air and South Vietnamese troops took back key towns from the enemy as weeks progressed. By June the offensive had unraveled, and the North’s leadership was forced to admit the failure of the “general offensive, general uprising” model yet again. Le Duan, in communications with comrades after the ARVN pushed communist troops out of Quang Tri City, confided that he believed the first objective of the North going forward was to force the Americans to withdraw. With a successful agreement for the Americans to leave Vietnam, he believed now, Hanoi would be able to “fight to make the puppets collapse” – the Thieu regime ensconced in Saigon. For the remainder of


43 Asselin, A Bitter Peace, 49.
the year, North Vietnam would rely primarily on diplomacy and political struggle to achieve its goals.\textsuperscript{44}

It would be the aftermath of the North’s spring 1972 offensive that would undo one of the main assumptions held by both sides in the conflict in the pursuit of settlement and victory – rather than military force creating an opening for favorable terms for the aggressor (North Vietnam) it resulted in the opposite effect. As the PAVN’s offensive crumbled, it left diplomacy as the only viable option for the North to save face. Kissinger’s meetings with Le Duc Tho, as a result, became more fruitful as the summer of 1972 wore on, and relations between America, the Soviets and China improved. Hanoi wanted to settle to change the balance of force in Vietnam, and pressed the diplomatic delegation in France into action. Tho, based on instructions from Hanoi, was prepared to compromise on the political issues for South Vietnam and demand a cease-fire and American withdrawal. On October 8, Le Duc Tho shocked Kissinger by delivering a new position at their Paris meeting – agreeing to all three conditions spelled out by Nixon in his May 8 address, and adding it would also accept the presence of the Thieu Government in Saigon after a cease-fire, an enormous concession from previous negotiating positions. Four days of bargaining would follow the initial meeting, and on October 12 Kissinger had the framework of a draft agreement – a treaty to end America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. As per the secret deal, the U.S. would withdraw forces within two months, a cease-fire would take effect in Indochina, bombing would cease, and the North would recognize an

\textsuperscript{44} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 260.
independent South Vietnam. In addition, there would be no coalition government in the interim, but a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord (*Hội đồng quốc gia hòa giải và hòa hợp*) to act as an intermediary. From the North’s perspective, concession on the issues of governance and the removal of Thieu, were necessary – as the VWP leadership saw only delay for its revolutionary aims as a result, not defeat. Peace, it seemed to Kissinger, was all but assured.\(^{45}\)

Kissinger returned to Washington the same day, relaying the results, telling the president elatedly he had gone “three for three” (meaning the USSR, China and Vietnam) in negotiations. But success now hinged on the Saigon government. In a now-declassified recording of the meeting following the tentative deal, Nixon said he would sign on if Thieu acceded. Kissinger told Nixon he believed Thieu would back the agreement, if all went according to plan a peace could be announced by October 26, with the cease-fire to go into effect on October 30, 1972.\(^{46}\) The breakthrough led to Nixon suspending bombing of North Vietnam above the 20th Parallel, effectively ending Linebacker. Euphoria, at least in Washington, D.C., was short lived, as Thieu would have to be convinced to sign off. Kissinger hand delivered an October 16, 1972 letter to Thieu in Saigon on October 18 – urging him that the October agreement was the best his government could hope for under the circumstances. “The most important


\(^{46}\) Executive Office Building 366-6; October 12, 1972; Nixon conversation with Kissinger, Alexander Haig and H.R. Haldeman; White House Tapes; NL, NA, Yorba Linda, California.
provisions of this agreement… is that your Government… will remain intact after the ceasefire has been observed,” Nixon wrote. “We will continue to provide your Government with the fullest support.” Saigon did not buy in, however, and Kissinger soon realized he had overpromised.47

Thieu was livid with the proposition of North Vietnamese troops remaining in the RVN, and wanted tougher language in any agreement on the DMZ. In later meetings, Thieu grew even more belligerent – charging Kissinger with selling him out with deals through Moscow and Beijing, and would not accept the present agreement. He saw Nixon as selling him out to secure his re election and American honor, and lectured Kissinger on how America should fight for its allies not to be a “devil’s advocate.” On October 24, Thieu went public in an address to the RVN National Assembly, saying he would never agree to a peace that imposed a coalition government on the South or allowed North Vietnamese troops to remain in his country and proposed Hanoi and Saigon negotiate a solution to their own disagreements. The next day, Radio Hanoi broadcast details of the secret agreement in Paris and accused Nixon of bad faith by attempting to delay in order to assuage Thieu. Despite Kissinger’s public statements on October 26, where he vowed “peace is at hand” the agreement to withdraw America from Vietnam was coming undone, courtesy of Washington’s ally in Saigon. 48

47 Richard Nixon, Oct. 16, 1972 Letter to Thieu; National Security Council Files, Box 862; Camp David Memos, September-December 1972; NL, NA, Yorba Linda, California.

By November 1972, talks between Washington and Hanoi had regressed – with both the U.S. and North Vietnam proposing new terms and reneging on old settled matters. Nixon was not eager to consider raising military pressure, despite his re-election on November 7th. He told Kissinger to seek an arrangement around the October agreement. However, if the North backtracked and insisted on a deal worse than the October 12 agreement, Nixon would authorize a massive strike on the North. It is clear, examining recently declassified cables from these negotiations, that at this point in 1972 Saigon presented just as much of an obstacle to Nixon’s desired peace, if not more so, than Hanoi. “Take a hard line with Saigon and an equally hard line with Hanoi,” Nixon dictated in a secret cable to Kissinger in Paris – telling him to use his discretion to break off talks if he saw fit. “We cannot make a bad deal simply because of the fact that the massive expectations which have been built up in this country for a settlement would lead to an equally massive letdown if bombing were to resume.” Despite his re-election, Nixon mused in his cable to Kissinger, he knew public opinion would not be on his side if heavy bombing would resume – but he believed he had to do what was right and necessary to secure an honorable exit, and would not accept a bad deal.49 Another alteration of the October 12 agreement was hashed out on November 25, with a few alterations – recognizing the DMZ as a “provisional” border, and the understanding some but not all of the North’s troops would be withdrawn.

49 Cable: Nixon to Kissinger, November 24, 1972; Henry A Kissinger (HAK) Office Files, Box 26, HAK Paris Trip; The Office of Henry A. Kissinger (TOHAK), Nov. 18-25, 1972; NL, NA, Yorba Linda, California.
Thieu’s demands remained though, and he would not agree to any deal without assurance the North would withdraw all troops from the South. Thus, the stage was set for Nixon to use military force one last time – with the aim to compel his ally and enemy to agree to a settlement.

After Nixon’s instructions, negotiations and additions went back and forth into December, and the threat of Congress taking action to end the war via its power of the purse loomed. Nixon discussed military plans with the Joint Chiefs should talks fail, and on December 13, 1972, linguists discovered the addition of some 17 changes into a completed version of a new agreement draft – with Le Duc Tho remaining defiant, telling Kissinger he had orders from Hanoi to not budge especially on the disposition of communist forces in South Vietnam. During a break on the day of the final meeting between Tho and Kissinger, the U.S. adviser reported that Hanoi was keeping Tho “on a tight leash” and overruling various deals and compromises he had made earlier.

Kissinger informed Nixon he believed talks at this point were pointless. Force, he argued to the president, would be necessary to increase pressure on Hanoi to pay for its intransigence, and to insure Thieu knew he had not “faced us down” by rejecting the October agreement. “We have now reached the point… where only the strongest action would have any effect” convincing Hanoi a fair settlement was better than continuing its war, Nixon recalled of the moment. Maximum force in a minimal timeframe would

50 Ibid.

be needed, and the only tool Nixon had left of his military options in Southeast Asia by late 1972 was the threat of American airpower on the nerve center of North Vietnam – the rail yards, storage facilities, airfields, communications hubs and power plants around Hanoi and Haiphong. It would be a use of strategic bombing not witnessed since the end of the Second World War. Plans for carrying out such a strike were drawn up by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the operation would be known as “Linebacker II.”

On December 14, as Le Duc Tho left Paris for Hanoi, Nixon ordered the campaign to begin December 18, and continue for 11 days – today known in the West as “the Christmas Bombings” and in North Vietnam as moi hay ngay dem, or “the 12 days of darkness.” On December 18th, waves of B-52 bombers struck storage areas, a rail yard and three airfields on the outskirts of Hanoi – the first time American bombers would target the North’s capital itself in the war. Except for a 24 hour reprieve on Christmas Day, U.S. military aircraft would drop more bombs on North Vietnam in this brief period than it had from 1969 to 1971, and the US Air Force would fly half as many B-52 sorties in the North in Linebacker II as it had during six months of

52 Clodfelter, The Limits of Airpower, 181-182.

53 Nguyen, Hanoi’s War, 295.
Linebacker I earlier that year.\textsuperscript{54} From December 18-20, 1972 a maximum effort poured down on Hanoi, with three B-52 waves a night pounding targets in and around the city. The second phase saw a reduced sortie rate, with strikes hitting along rail lines. In the last phase, the weight of the effort was again directed at Hanoi and Haiphong targets. In total, 59 targets were bombed by 1,364 Air Force sorties alone (the campaign saw over 3,400 sorties flown by all U.S. military services). For the bomber crews, the effort was highly dangerous as they flew into some of the most heavily defended airspace in the world – and during the campaign, the U.S. lost 15 B-52s, 13 smaller aircraft and 31 pilots became prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{55}

Nixon was determined to force a peace, no matter which party stood in his way. In a personal letter to Thieu on the eve of the bombing, he told the RVN head of state the campaign was a means to an end, and the actions should not be interpreted as a “willingness or intent to continue U.S. military involvement if Hanoi meets the requirements for a settlement which I have set,” Nixon declared – a revelation which reportedly left Thieu shaken. At the same time, while the Chinese and Soviets condemned the bombings in public, behind the scenes they again privately pressured Hanoi to settle – with the Soviet ambassador to Hanoi telling North Vietnamese officials they should demand only the cessation of bombing as a condition to resume

\textsuperscript{54} Herman Glister, \textit{The Air War in Southeast Asia: Case Studies of Selected Campaigns} (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1993), 75-76.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
As the campaign progressed, VWP leadership concluded it could not ignore the threat of continued bombing disrupting supply lines and demolishing valuable infrastructure built up over years – disorienting an already battered population. Only when Hanoi agreed to return to the table on December 26 did the raids relent in severity – continuing for another three days. Linebacker II ended on December 29, 1972, with the conditions for a peace deal now significantly altered.\(^{57}\)

The year 1972 began with North Vietnam finalizing plans for securing victory on the battlefield, but ended with the U.S. applying savvy diplomacy, and ultimately limited military force to secure terms for an acceptable peace. At 17 minutes before midnight on December 29, an American bomber dropped its last bomb of the Linebacker II campaign over North Vietnam. The North had depleted its surface to air missile (SAM) stockpiles, and Hanoi’s air defenses were exhausted. Nixon, aware of this, halted bombing above the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) Parallel and informed Hanoi he would make a “final major effort” at an agreement modeled on the October 12 deal. Kissinger would spend no more than four days negotiating in the next round, Nixon vowed – and further delay would result in a resumption of bombing. Nixon would publicly announce the resumption of talks in Paris was set for January 8, 1973.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{56}\) Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 295.

\(^{57}\) Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower*, 196.

\(^{58}\) Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*, 151.
Just as Nixon had changed the American perspective on the war, the disastrous military and diplomatic events of 1972 altered the tables for America’s enemies in Hanoi. By year’s end, the Cold War alliances which had kept the North’s revolutionary efforts provisioned had come undone, and Le Duan and Tho saw a settlement with the Americans as a means to an end, a bitter pill to swallow but one necessary to their long term goal of reunification under a communist government. Nixon’s final gamble of using the instrument of American bombing had worked, for its limited purposes – as the campaign was essentially a political instrument that sought a political goal. By late 1972, as author and critic of U.S. airpower in the war Mark Clodfelter concedes, Nixon’s heavy bombing threatened more than Hanoi’s ability to prevail in its struggle over South Vietnam, but more importantly the ability of North Vietnam to ultimately defend itself. As such, the conditions were forged for Nixon to secure an agreement to leave Vietnam on American terms, with U.S. credibility largely intact.\(^{59}\)

The New Year would see the signing of a historic settlement, the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords, but not the end of war in Vietnam. After agreeing to return to the table in Paris, senior VWP politburo member Truong Chinh traveled to Beijing on December 31, 1972 to meet with PRC Premier Zhou Enlai to ask the Chinese leader his assessment of the North’s negotiating prospects. Zhou had good rapport with the VWP leader and told him Hanoi needed to negotiate seriously with the aim of reaching an immediate agreement. The Americans, he noted, were on their way out of Southeast

Asia – advice he repeated to Le Duc Tho days later. “The situation will change in six months or a year,” Zhou said, in a telling prediction of future events. “The most important [thing] is to let the Americans leave.”

60 Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 297.
CHAPTER III:

THE “GOOD WAR”: BARACK OBAMA’S BATTLE FOR PEACE IN AFGHANISTAN

In contrast to the military and diplomatic events of 1972, which conspired to set the stage for the renewal of the Paris Peace Talks, the wielding of American military power and diplomacy to achieve a similar result in Afghanistan 40 years later would prove far more problematic. In contrast with Nixon’s experiences in 1972, this chapter aims to analyze the assumptions, conditions and events, which transpired from the formulation to the execution and conclusion of President Barack H. Obama’s “surge,” as seen from the perspectives of the Obama Administration, the Karzai government and its Taliban enemies – and reveals the differences in these events. The scope of this chapter is from 2009 to 2012 and will illustrate critical perceptions, decisions and military and diplomatic events from Kabul to the Pakistani borderlands to Washington D.C. Obama would attempt to change the strategic balance of the war by increasing American military forces – but fail to realize his goals in doing so. The story of the surge will be explored in this chapter in four main sections. The first will provide a brief summary of the conditions of the Afghan war upon Obama’s arrival in the White House and why he felt the surge was necessary. Second, this chapter will explore the deliberations and assumptions driving decision making on three sides of the conflict from 2009 to 2012; those of Hamid Karzai’s government, those of his enemies in the Taliban and finally the assumptions and deliberations of Barack Obama and his war cabinet. Third, the military and diplomatic aspects of the surge will be discussed, as
well as the goals these strategies sought to achieve. Fourth, the results of the surge will be scrutinized, as well as the assumptions of all sides in the conflict – to show whether or not they proved accurate.

While the historical record is still being compiled on the Afghan war, a wide number of academic studies, reports and public statements can provide important context for both the military and political aims of the Afghan surge from 2009-2012. In addition, the primary sources will include the author’s interviews conducted during and after a spring 2011 visit to Afghanistan. One interview was with the former American commander in the country – then-U.S. Army Gen. David Petraeus. These insights gained from the author’s interviews will provide important perspectives on the conflict during a crucial phase of the “surge.”

For background, it is important to examine why the Obama Administration embarked on a surge policy, and why the American president believed this escalation would prove decisive in ending the conflict successfully. Obama’s justification for this escalation, it should be noted, was couched in terms remarkably similar to Nixon’s pursuit of an honorable peace in Southeast Asia over four decades ago. His December 2009 West Point speech, unveiling the military surge, contains multiple references to lifting the U.S. burden of the war – even as he was announcing an expansion of the

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1 The notes and interview transcripts are from the author’s personal papers gathered from a March 2011 visit to US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, while on assignment for Air Force magazine. The interview with General Petraeus was conducted by phone on May 27, 2011, from Arlington, Virginia.
conflict with more troops, saying American should not fight an “endless war.”" But the formulation of his administration’s policies differs significantly from Nixon’s approach to the Vietnam War, and his path towards extracting America from Central Asia using military force and diplomacy has proved more difficult and byzantine. As Chapter II illustrated of events of the year 1972 in Vietnam, this thesis will examine why the stated goals of Obama’s policies were not achieved between 2009 and 2012, and to what extent his assumptions proved accurate. Most importantly, why did the fitful efforts to set the stage for a negotiated settlement proved unsuccessful by the time the last of the American “surge” troops left Afghanistan in September 2012?

In deciding a path forward in Afghanistan, Obama confronted a far different war than Nixon did in Vietnam, at least from the point of view of the American public. While Nixon’s policies in Vietnam were marred by a divided American attitude towards the nation’s war in Southeast Asia, Obama’s receivership of the Afghan conflict was marred because it was more convoluted, with differences of opinion amongst his advisors and military leaders, lack of understanding of the state of the war, and its perceptions were tied up in the attitudes towards his predecessor’s conduct of another American conflict – the Iraq war.

By 2009, America as a whole did not have strong opinions on the Afghan war. Obama’s election, in part, was a repudiation of eight years of the presidency of the

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Republican George W. Bush, who, according to the view of many Democrats, had squandered an opportunity to “win” in Afghanistan by taking on a costly, bloody and inconclusive war in Iraq in 2003. Back in August 2007, his campaign for the Democratic Party’s nomination already well underway, then-Senator Obama declared the war in Afghanistan “the war that has to be won,” pledging to deploy an additional two brigades worth of U.S. troops to the country to help the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) coalition of allies to put pressure on Taliban militants, and aid the Afghan government in fostering peace. Obama vowed not to repeat the “mistake of the past, when we turned our back on Afghanistan,” citing the failure of the Bush Administration to back up its lofty rhetoric on giving aid to the fledgling post-Taliban government, and instead turning its attention to the Iraq war launched in spring of 2003. “For Obama, Afghanistan had been the good war, the war that began with two fallen towers, not the war that stemmed from faulty intelligence and exaggerated claims of weapons of mass destruction,” Chandrasekaran noted. Obama vowed to press the reset button for America’s efforts in Central Asia, and increase resources for military commanders in Afghanistan and non-military aid to the country.\(^3\)

In his early thinking on what would become his military surge, per Chandrasekaran, Obama revealed a key assumption which would drive his decision making – Afghanistan, Obama believed, was suffering more from the fatigue of the U.S. military having to fight two simultaneous wars than from any real error in

strategy. “Obama had thought that fixing the Afghan War would be relatively straightforward. The effort simply needed more resources,” Chandrasekaran writes. The two additional brigades, around 10,000 additional troops, he promised during his campaign for the presidency was what the top military leadership in Afghanistan had sought for some time. But the Bush Administration had not acted on the request by mid 2008 – in part because U.S. military officials claimed every available unit which was not training, resting, or otherwise assigned other tasks was slated for the Iraq war. By this point in the conflict, less than 40,000 American troops were fighting in Afghanistan. Though Bush acceded to requests by August 2008, the Taliban’s influence and efforts in the country kept gaining strength, flying in the face of often-optimistic assessments of the war. Only a year earlier, Karzai declared at a press conference with Bush at Camp David, Maryland, that the Taliban was “a force that’s defeated,” – a statement which would soon seem far from the truth.\(^4\)

Unlike a mass offensive such as Tet 1968, the Taliban’s strategy after the U.S. invasion in 2001 was to slowly gain influence by utilizing sanctuaries in Pakistan and by exploiting discontent with the Kabul government of Karzai. By the end of the Bush Administration, U.S. and NATO metrics revealed a disturbing rise in several types of violence. Taliban and associated insurgent attacks on U.S. and Afghan government forces rose 27 percent from the year before, suicide bombings had gone from six in 2004 to 140 in 2007, and Helmand Province – a key part of Southern Afghanistan not

far from the Taliban’s spiritual home of Kandahar – saw the highest levels of violence since the fall of the Taliban in 2001.\(^5\)

The Taliban would demonstrate their strength as time wore on with brazen attacks on U.S. bases. On August 19, 2008, a team of Taliban infantry attackers fitted with suicide vests carried out an attack on a U.S. base in Afghanistan’s Khost Province. However, three attackers were shot dead and three more detonated their explosive vests before breaching the base’s wall.\(^6\) While the assault on the base, while a tactical failure, it was the second such attack on the base that week, the previous day two bombers driving explosive-filled cars detonated themselves outside the gates of the base, Camp Salerno. In a far more audacious assault, 30 miles from the capital Kabul, an estimated 100 Taliban militants attacked a French patrol – killing 10, in the deadliest ground ambush of the war since it began in 2001.\(^7\) By the end of 2008, U.S. military leaders would be telling Washington D.C. regularly that America was not winning in Afghanistan, but it was not losing either. The Taliban’s increasing military boldness in 2008 crafted perceptions in many quarters the Afghan war was deteriorating. The question facing Obama would be: how would a newly elected President Obama diagnose a long-term solution to a largely stalemated war – either through military or diplomatic means, or a mix of both?

\(^5\) Ibid.


\(^7\) Ibid.
As Chapter II revealed, Nixon’s ideas about “Vietnamization” were largely formed before his election in late 1968. In contrast, all indications show Obama did not possess a master plan, which he confided with supporters in private or his close advisors. Aside from his general belief in the need for resources, he had no grand political-military designs on the fate of the Afghan war. Moreover, unlike the attitude of many Americans towards the Vietnam conflict in the aftermath of Tet 1968, Obama still believed that the war in Afghanistan could be “won.” Obama’s election also was largely driven by domestic policies, such as the worsening economy and the American public’s weariness of Bush. As Chandrasekaran noted, Afghanistan was not the most pressing issue of his campaign – not on the level Vietnam had dominated the 1968 U.S. election. But by January 2009, just weeks before his inauguration, Obama was already receiving assessments on the war from multiple sources – from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. military command in charge of Afghanistan, and from the White House’s own special office for the conduct of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Consensus within the U.S. national security leadership in the war – the senior military officials and diplomats working in Kabul – was hard to ascertain, and the lack of consensus or clear vision would be a factor throughout Obama’s decision-making process. 8

Before deliberations even began, Obama sought some idea of what he was getting into early in 2009. Just weeks before his inauguration, Obama dispatched his

8 Chandrasekaran, Little America, 37-38.
Vice President-elect, the experienced foreign policy hand and former Senator Joseph
Biden, on a trip to Pakistan and Afghanistan to get a ground level perspective of the
state of the war. Biden made the trip with South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey
Graham. After a visit to dignitaries in Islamabad, Pakistan, the pair met in secret in
Afghanistan with U.S. Commander, Army General David McKiernan. Biden told
McKiernan that Obama would be sending more troops and asked bluntly – could he
make things better? “We’re not losing,” McKiernan told the Vice President. “But to get
off the fence to where we’re actually winning we need these additional troops,” the
general said, referring to a request dating back to the Bush Administration for more
military manpower.9

McKiernan’s description of the war would be a pervasive mindset from the
beginning of 2009 to the end of the surge in 2012 – conversations about the Afghan
war would be dominated by talk of manpower, numbers of troops, and not strategy,
especially from military commanders. McKiernan gave a situation report about the
war, citing gains in the country’s east, but also a deteriorating situation in the country’s
south near Kandahar and Helmand, the historic strongholds of the Taliban. In an
indication of his future skepticism about the war, Biden wondered what was being
done in the east that was not being done in the south, and expressed skepticism about
the general’s answers, according to Bob Woodward’s reporting on the visit.10


10 Ibid.
conversation with McKiernan would air another assumption that would continue to vex U.S. decision makers – the relationship between al Qaeda and the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Indeed, the failure of the Taliban to hand over bin Laden and his associates to the United States was one of the main drivers behind the American invasion in October 2001. What about al Qaeda, he asked, what was their presence in Afghanistan now? “We haven’t really seen an Arab here in a couple of years,” McKiernan said – referring to al Qaeda’s membership, composed almost entirely of Arabs, not the ethnic Pashtuns of the Taliban. The Taliban were a growing problem in the country the previous few years, but for all practical purposes, there was no al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the general added, confirming what Biden already suspected: al Qaeda was a problem for neighboring Pakistan, not Afghanistan anymore.11

Biden’s observation, just weeks before Obama’s inauguration, echoes Schrecker’s analysis of one of the surge’s fatal flaws. U.S. decision makers, not just Obama, had long assumed al Qaeda’s relocation to Afghanistan would follow a return of the Taliban. In the aftermath of the 2001 invasion, al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden were scattered – many retreating to the remote tribal regions of the Pakistan borderlands, beyond the grasp or authority of the government in Islamabad. Even with the Taliban’s resurgence, there seemed no need to leave what had become a “viable sanctuary” in Pakistan, and evidence would suggest even by early 2009 that the relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda was far more complex than U.S.

11 Ibid., 71.
leadership believed. Ties between the Taliban and al Qaeda had become “divisive” in some quarters of the movement, as al Qaeda became associated with the movement’s loss of power in their homeland – a fact the United States “would do well to exploit regardless of the strategy that is employed,” Schrecker wrote in April 2010. As the Obama Administration began to formulate military and diplomatic approaches to the Afghan war, its understanding about this subtle aspect of the conflict would have great implications for the conflict by the end of his military surge, because failed to understand this split between al Qaeda and the Taliban and use it as a wedge for America purposes.

Much like in Nixon’s inheritance of the conflict in Vietnam, Obama found himself dealing with an uncomfortable ally in the form of Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai – and Karzai’s assumptions and perspectives on the surge period from 2009 to 2012 are critical to understanding its outcome. It is clear even before Obama arrived in Washington D.C., that Karzai had his own perceptions and interests in the Afghan war. While he enjoyed a more personable relationship with President Bush, he was often at odds with the American government’s designs on his power – which would worsen with Obama’s arrival. In a telling example of conflicts to come, in August 2008, around the same time Taliban attackers were assaulting U.S. bases in the

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country, Karzai faced a dilemma representative of his tenure as an antagonist towards American aims who was also dependent on U.S. patronage.

That August, Sher Mohammed Akhundzada, a close ally of Karzai’s and a former governor of embattled Helmand Province, was pressing the Afghan president for reinstatement after his removal from the governorship due to U.S. pressure over Mohammed’s ineffectiveness and corruption. Though a new governor had proven effective and popular with Helmandis, Karzai became frustrated with the situation and resented Western pressure. “Why do we have Taliban controlling (Helmand) now when two years ago I had control of Helmand?” Karzai vented at a U.S. State Department official during an August 2008 meeting at his presidential palace. When Mohammed was governor, Karzai exclaimed, girls were enrolled in schools and only 160 U.S. and foreign troops were present. He lamented that the “international community” pressed for Mohammed’s removal for corruption. “My question,” Karzai pressed to the diplomat, “is do you want a bad guy on your side or working for the Taliban?”

Karzai’s troubles with his allies over perceptions of corruption reflected the uncomfortable reality of his government’s dependence on American aid – yet discomfort with American expectations. Much like Thieu’s foot-dragging and blackmail, Karzai would prove a mercurial player in Obama’s attempt to gain a favorable settlement in Afghanistan. Karzai’s Afghan government, also, held a small

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13 Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 82.
but strategically important distinction between the present Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and Thieu’s Republic of Vietnam.

The challenge for Karzai during the period of Obama’s surge, as with Thieu during the Nixon Presidency, is not one of combat power and military victory – but legitimacy, noted scholar Thomas Johnson and retired U.S. Foreign Service Officer M. Chris Mason. As time wore on after the initial American invasion in 2001, the public perception of his presidency in Afghanistan steadily shifted from “contempt to scorn” as the problem of cronyism increased. This was particularly apparent after Karzai’s August 2009 re-election, a contest that featured widely reported incidences of ballot stuffing. But rather than the election being the issue, it was the concept of Western-style elections which created problems as it was viewed as having little historical precedent as a basis for legitimizing Afghan governance. The notion that the Bush Administration, and then Obama afterward, could apply ballot-box democracy to Afghan society was “wishful thinking,” Johnson and Mason concluded in 2009. It is no accident that Afghanistan, unlike Vietnam, has no modern experience with Western colonialism and remains a highly segmented society. Rather than understanding traditional lines of coalition building activities as defined by tribal and dynastic lineage, as well as deal making taking into account Afghanistan’s many religious identities, Karzai’s “election” was perceived as less than legitimate in many ways because it was gained through Western-style elections. Not understanding this dynamic.

would seriously harm Obama’s efforts to build the legitimacy of Karzai’s government – a core goal of the surge. Westernized concepts of a strong, central government would hold little sway in a country where power was balanced through tribal and religious authorities for thousands of years.\(^{15}\)

Legitimacy and sovereignty would play a huge role in the dysfunctional relationship between the Kabul government and Washington D.C., throughout the course of the surge. Obama, already wary of Karzai, had criticized the conduct of Karzai’s re-election in August 2009 – and the dynamic between the two would worsen as time wore on. In early April 2010, for example, Karzai publicly accused the U.S. of perpetrating a fraud which had denied him an outright victory in his August 2009 re-election, and warned NATO nations that they were at risk of being seen by Afghans as foreign occupiers and invaders rather than as saviors as time wore on – prompting unhappy phone calls from American officials. Karzai’s unhappiness with foreign pressure would lead to many public and private outbursts. In another April 2010 meeting with members of the Afghan parliament, he stated that if he was pressured more by Americans he was “going to join the Taliban.”\(^{16}\)

Unlike Nixon’s and Kissinger’s understanding of Thieu’s motivations and insecurities, which they were largely able to navigate by the end of 1972, the Obama Administration demonstrated that it knew little about what motivated Karzai’s

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{16}\) Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 165.
behavior and perspectives. Karzai understood that coalition building and dealing in
favors kept him in power – in addition to American aid. The presence of more foreign
troops in order to give his government time to build its legitimacy complicated his
plans as much as helped them. “Afghanistan will be fixed when its people trust that
their president is independent and not a puppet,” Karzai declared to a packed Kandahar
meeting hall at one of the palaces of his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who had his own
reputation for graft and even drug trafficking. “We have to demonstrate our
sovereignty. We have to demonstrate that we are standing up for our values,” Karzai
said, then assuring his brother’s allies in the room further American military operations
in the district would not take place until they were satisfied with the conditions. The
declaration, made not long after Karzai had lambasted NATO in public, elicited great
applause, and illustrated a deep disconnect between Obama and Karzai. Obama, and
American officials before him, believed tribal rivalries, inequitable distribution of
power and the Kabul government’s failure to provide basic services were large factors
pushing Afghans into the arms of the Taliban. More American troops and a
comprehensive anti-guerilla strategy called “counterinsurgency” (known in the military
as COIN) which called for stronger centralized government and greater accountability
from Kabul, would counter this, U.S. officials claimed.17

In actuality, Karzai had little faith in the COIN strategy – which would be
deadly for its potential success. He would turn out to be correct. To Karzai, the main

17 Ibid.
problem was the return of Taliban militants from Pakistan infiltrating through the border – and he wanted U.S. and NATO troops to focus on stopping the return of his enemies. By sending U.S. troops into places like Kandahar and Helmand, Americans and their allies were disrupting what Karzai saw as Afghan power structures – a natural order of self-regulating Pashtun tribal governance, not Western concepts of government.¹⁸

There is ample historical evidence to support Karzai’s perspective on governance in Afghanistan dating back to the 18th Century, when the modern history of the country is traced to a figure named Ahmad Shah Duranni, a Pashtun who cobbled together alliances with tribes and sects across Central Asia to form an empire. These alliances, shifted with the rise and fall of rulers and the co-option of powers such as the British – who failed to colonize the country on multiple occasions in the 19th Century. It also made effective use of Afghan distrust of outsiders, and would form a system of power brokering not just across Pashtun tribes, but other ethnic groups as well. More importantly, both Karzai and the Taliban draw their power base from Pashtun tribes of southern Afghanistan. Karzai himself is from the Poplazi Pashtun tribe, with lineage that can be traced from Duranni himself. Pashtun tribes were at the forefront of this system, which would last until the Soviet Union’s invasion in 1979.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid.  
The system Karzai has used to expand his power, dubbed “neo patrimonialism” by some scholars, builds legitimacy through personal loyalty rather than on technocratic legitimacy, as in Western democracies. Deal making, power sharing, and occasionally violence are part of this system, built around regions and *quams*, a Pashto word meaning a segment of society, such as an extended family or village. While deal making amongst Afghan tribes was a part of this system, writes scholar Steve Hess, the addition of foreign sources of patronage added another layer to existing systems of loyalties in Afghan society by the end of the 19th Century. Even in periods when institution building was emphasized, as during the rule of the Soviet client state of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) after the 1979 invasion and then in the period after the 2001 U.S. invasion, these institutions soon came to be pervaded by patrimonial forms of authority and favoritism. From Karzai’s perspective, it was maddening for his U.S. patrons to lecture him on activities which, in his eyes, long determined the balance of power in the country – and secured his hold on it. The network of personal loyalty Karzai assembled in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion, Hess writes, has functioned as the glue that holds his support base together. Lectures from Washington, D.C. about government performance and accountability rather than stability placed Karzai in the awkward position of having to upset his network of patronage at the expense of Western support. These tensions would worsen, as Obama’s surge in military forces was implemented in Afghanistan.²⁰

Underappreciated and criticized by U.S. officials, Karzai (much like Thieu during the Nixon Administration) sought to expand his base of international support, to counter the possibility of the U.S. selling him out in a separate peace with his Taliban enemies. India proved to be a large source of support. Since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, Karzai took full advantage of the aid and assistance provided to his government from India, a rising Asian power, and rival to Afghanistan’s sometimes-difficult neighbor Pakistan. One Indian intelligence official told scholar Seth Jones that India “took advantage of a window of opportunity” to develop close ties with Karzai, and counter Pakistani influence – as India correctly understood the implications of a Taliban government, friendly with Pakistan, coming to power. Over the course of the decade after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, India provided several hundreds of millions of dollars in financial assistance to Karzai’s Afghanistan, funding construction of government buildings, establishing consulates in Afghan cities, and giving money to election campaigns and to Afghan parliament officials. The India-Afghanistan alliance would serve to isolate Pakistan in South Asia, at least that’s how powerful officials in the Pakistani military and intelligence services perceived these developments.21

Consequently, Pakistani assistance – especially covert assistance to Taliban and affiliated militias – was a way of countering this influence. “The foremost objective of Pakistan has been to establish a friendly government in Kabul that at the minimum does not pose a second front in the event of a war with India,” one Pakistani Army general noted of his country’s strategic assessment of Afghanistan. The U.S. would

21 Jones, Graveyard of Empires, 301-303
leave eventually. The Taliban, on the other hand, has had ties with Islamabad dating back to their rule in the 1990s – providing weapons, aid and logistical support in the vacuum created by the pullout of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan’s descent into civil war. Karzai understood what Obama largely failed to understand: Pakistan’s interests were not aligned with his government’s interests necessarily, and certainly not America’s interests. Obama’s failure to appreciate this dynamic, build it into his strategy, and internalize Karzai’s perception of the shadowy influence of Pakistan on violence in his country would greatly affect the events and results of the military surge.\textsuperscript{22}

Meanwhile, Karzai’s enemies in the Taliban movement had adjusted tactics, goals and strategies by the time of the Obama Administration. In the last few years, academics and researchers have gained valuable insight into the Taliban’s motivations and strategic views of the conflict, as the idea of negotiation and reconciliation between the Kabul government and the Taliban has gained more ground – even amongst the Taliban itself.\textsuperscript{23} In one of the earliest efforts at peace building, Taliban and Afghan government officials met in Saudi Arabia in October 2008 to explore talks – years before the idea was even broached seriously by the Obama Administration. Taliban leaders, since then, are divided. Some Taliban elements are interested in talks

\textsuperscript{22} Jones, \textit{Graveyard of Empires}, 301-303.

but the prospects remain hindered by mistrust, ambiguity from the Americans and Karzai, as well as efforts by the Taliban themselves to escalate their military advantage to gain a position of strength from which to dictate negotiation terms – much like Nixon sought towards the end of the Vietnam War. One group remains more interested in talks, one less so – but both remain wary and mistrustful.24

The Taliban’s attitudes towards peace and reconciliation had profound impacts on their reaction to American conduct of the war, and Obama’s eventual escalation of it. In a groundbreaking October 2010 special report from the U.S. Institutes of Peace (USIP), researcher Matt Waldman collected interviews from January through June 2010 with fourteen Taliban fighters and commanders from various factions of the movement – during the time that American military forces were escalating the surge into Afghanistan. From interviewing Taliban foot soldiers and commanders, Waldman gleaned that the movement had made steady military gains in the country from 2006 to 2010, increasing control and influence in more than half the country in the south and southeast parts of Afghanistan all the way to the center and west. Taliban commanders acknowledged they were “fatigued” from fighting, but they were still confident in the movement’s prospect for success in the long run, and its ability to force foreign forces to withdraw from Afghanistan. Several interviewees noted that Pakistani territory was used to full advantage by Taliban units – much like how the Vietcong utilized Cambodia before Nixon’s bombings. Moreover, as Waldman’s interviews revealed, the Taliban depended on the sparsely governed tribal regions near the Afghan border for

24 Ibid.
logistics, planning, training, recruitment, treatment of wounded and recuperation.

Several Taliban commanders confirmed that funding, munitions, equipment and other forms of aid were provided by or through Pakistan’s Directorate for Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), a shadowy intelligence service much like the American CIA. While some in the movement appreciated the aid, some interviewees noted there were grievances over ISI influence on the Taliban. Despite differences in factions and a division between Afghan and Pakistani Taliban members, the overriding motivation for continuing to fight the Americans, their allies and the Kabul government was due to retaliation for perceived military aggression by foreigners – and linking these operations to civilian deaths. “The foreigners here do not observe the rules of their own countries,” one Afghan Taliban fighter said. “They shout about human rights more than most but then they kill people and call it a mistake. How can they call it a mistake after eight years? If this continues, the resistance will continue.” The presence of foreign troops, rather than a detriment to the Taliban, appeared to be a useful recruiting tool – a fact that would have grave implications for the conduct of Obama’s surge.25

According to Waldman’s interviews, the war against the U.S. was often couched in religious and cultural terms – as foreigners were seen as aggressors who wanted to destroy Islamic values, and were propping up a non-Islamic puppet government in Karzai. Taliban commanders noted their resurgent influence was due to the corruption and injustices of the Kabul government, as many traditional Afghans saw these acts as un-Islamic. “Many fight… because of the killing of Afghans, the

25 Ibid., 3.
invasion and order of the Holy Quran to stand up against injustice and corrupt government,” said one Taliban commander from Wardak Province, east of Kabul. The lack of Islamic law, he added, means a robber or murderer can buy himself out of trouble with the Karzai government – a practice deemed unacceptable to many more traditional Afghans. Importantly, many insurgents, in the tradition of deal making and coalition building by tribal affiliation in the country, see allying with the Taliban as a means of challenging exclusion via cronies of Karzai and gaining leverage in local power struggles. This is important to note, since motivations for Taliban fighters went beyond the desire to expel foreign military forces, and many militants see one of their aims as the return of legitimate governance. Especially of note is that this governance does not necessarily include the return of al Qaeda. The Taliban commanders interviewed by Waldman did not espouse al Qaeda’s hard line ideology, saying they favored “good relations with foreign countries.” The Taliban, according to the commanders interviewed, had different goals, and a different ethnic background, and noted al Qaeda was composed primarily of Arabs while the Taliban was a Pashtun movement. None of the Taliban interviewed considered the terrorist organization a significant actor in Afghanistan by 2009.26 The disconnect between al Qaeda and the Taliban movement, first hinted at by Vice President Biden’s conversation with McKiernan in January 2009, would prove important – and one the Obama Administration would fail to exploit for diplomatic leverage.

26 Ibid., 5-7.
The perspectives, assumptions and goals of Obama, his civilian advisors, cabinet officials and senior military leaders on the war, unlike the Taliban and Karzai, were far more diffuse. Even before Obama would publicly announce his escalation in December 2009, a long and torturous deliberation process would consume his administration – in contrast to the largely consolidated decision making of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s war and diplomatic strategies.

In January 2009, Obama arrived in the Oval Office to discover a near total lack of consensus on what to do in Afghanistan. As will be shown, his civilian advisors, his State Department officials, and even his senior military commanders had different and often clashing ideas. Obama, unlike Nixon, did not have an equivalent foreign policy operator in the vein of Kissinger in his White House, with whom he could consolidate power and decision making on Afghanistan. As a result, not surprisingly, over the course of the coming years discord and turnover in Obama’s national security team would disrupt consistent policy decision-making. This dynamic would help insure months of laborious and time consuming study and re-studying of the Afghan conflict, and the path towards resolving it – or at least fundamentally changing the strategic calculus for all parties: the Afghan government, the U.S. and the Taliban and its allies.

Even before Obama convened his first Security Council meeting to discuss conditions and assumptions about the war, a top U.S. military official was taking stock of what lay ahead – and what was possible. The official was U.S. Central Command’s Gen. David Petraeus, the general who presided over the most violent period of the Iraq war and a staunch believer in counterinsurgency. Petraeus was the head of all U.S.
military activity in the Middle East and Central Asia at the time, as Central Command (CENTCOM) is the Pentagon’s military planning region that encompasses its Afghanistan and Pakistan operations. Counterinsurgency’s tenets held that governance, security of citizens, and legitimacy building of public institutions were more important activities than killing and destroying enemy units, particularly in a shadowy guerilla war like Afghanistan.

On January 22, 2009, a day before the first meeting of Obama’s National Security Council (NSC) on the matter of the Afghan war, Petraeus received a briefing about Afghanistan from one of his most trusted intelligence advisors – a retired Army colonel named Derek Harvey, who worked at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The U.S., Harvey told Petraeus, was grossly ignorant about the state of the Afghan war and the intelligence process had not answered basic questions since 2001. Fundamentals of the war such as who the enemy was, where they are, how do they perceive the war and what their motivations are have not been answered, he said. “We know too little about the enemy to craft a winning strategy,” Harvey would tell Petraeus. Harvey also told Petraeus that the Afghanistan commander McKiernan believed that reconciliation – making peace with elements of the Taliban and its allies – could not be done in Afghanistan. As a result, McKiernan did not direct intelligence to gather information on social and political issues of tribes and regions. As time went on, Harvey would sift through voluminous amounts of data, on troops, on Afghan government forces and on Taliban patterns, in order to find a way forward. A COIN strategy could work, he concluded, but the U.S would have to make large, long-term
commitments for years, which might not sell with the voting public. “I think Afghanistan is doable,” Harvey would tell Petraeus. But, he added, “It’s not sellable.” Petraeus would try relentlessly to sell COIN in the coming months, however.27

The next day, January 23, 2009, Obama convened his first meeting on the Afghan war with the NSC in the White House’s Situation Room. He told his advisors he had campaigned for sending more troops into the war, but had not made his decision yet. “When we send them, we need to announce it in the context of a broader strategy,” he said – adding the U.S. would re-orient how it approached defeating al Qaeda. While the military would be a part of the solution it would not be the driver of the policy, he emphasized. However, this statement would prove false by the end of Obama’s surge, as the Pentagon would heavily influence policy.28

Further convoluting the decision-making process, military reviews of the war were running in early 2009 -- Petraeus’ review; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff had a review; and the White House’s “war czar” Army Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute’s review. Obama ordered all the studies consolidated into one product, and then for the Pentagon to explain the logic for adding more troops, and how they would fight going forward. Obama had promised in his campaign to reorient the foreign policy of the United States, especially towards the issue of Afghanistan. He especially wanted more

27 Woodward, Obama’s Wars, 77-79.

28 Ibid., 80.
American study on the role and influence of Afghanistan’s nuclear-armed neighbor Pakistan – as it played an influential role with the Taliban and its allies in the region.29

Almost immediately, the divide between the President’s views, the views of his senior military and the views of his civilian cabinet became clear. These divisions would serve to exacerbate the deliberation process on how to proceed with the war. The scale, in numbers of troops, and not in strategy, would dominate deliberations in the coming months before Obama’s December 2009 speech unveiling his escalation.

Petraeus said the U.S. “cannot achieve our objectives without more troops,” the objective being to prevent Afghanistan from again becoming a sanctuary of al Qaeda. Petraeus’ view would add another assumption that would pervade military thinking and decisions – the U.S. cannot just do counterterrorism with elite special operations raids and air strikes with drones targeting terrorists. It must also do COIN to stabilize Afghanistan, meaning more personnel to protect Afghans, to build up the Afghan Army and to perform other tasks. Petraeus closed his argument saying the White House should fulfill McKiernan’s request for 30,000 more troops dated from the end of the Bush Administration, which the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Navy Admiral Michael Mullen, supported. Obama asked if the military needed all of this immediately, prompting a near eruption by Vice President Biden. “We have not thought through our strategic goals!” Biden exclaimed. He added that Obama should agree to a strategy before the president ordered more troops. Biden and Obama would

29 Ibid., 80.
ask more questions about the increase -- Where would it lead? Is this the beginning of
a ramp-up? Is this connected with a larger strategy?30

Petraeus said he would move forward with the troop request – only to be shot
down by Obama’s Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel. “The President hasn’t made any
decisions, and I want that to be absolutely clear,” he told Petraeus. By February 13,
Obama met with the NSC again with several options before him: a revised troop
reinforcement number of 17,000; a decision on troops after the first of several strategy
reviews of that year; or a full 27,000 troops, close to the original McKiernan request.
Worrying about the upcoming August 2009 Afghan election, and pressed by the senior
military commanders, Obama approved the infusion of 17,000 additional troops. But
he did not announce the decision with a press conference or speech, despite the fact it
was the first step in a broad escalation of the war.31

If decision-making in Nixon’s approach to Vietnam policy was largely
consolidated, Obama’s journey to deciding on the military surge was fractured and
chaotic. The February decision would mark the beginning of a long period of
deliberation, discussion and debate between the White House, the military, the State
Department and other stakeholders in his administration – which would go on until the
December 1, 2009 announcement of the military surge. During this time, as numerous
strategy options were debated, a new military commander arrived in Afghanistan and

30 Ibid., 81,96.

31 Ibid.
Karzai was re-elected in a controversial August 2009 plebiscite. In the aftermath of Obama’s February decision, his military leadership, in the form of Admiral Mullen, decided it was time to make a change in commanders in Afghanistan to more forcefully prosecute a counterinsurgency fight. Mullen perceived McKiernan was not sufficiently up to the task of leading a COIN mission, never minding Obama had not decided on this strategy yet. In April, Mullen informed McKiernan he needed to retire – with McKiernan replying he would not quit voluntarily.\textsuperscript{32}

On May 11, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced McKiernan’s position would be filled by Army Lt. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, a general who would argue forcefully the need for COIN to build governance and inhibit the Taliban’s return to power, until McChrystal’s own dismissal in summer 2010. “I knew I was taking command of an increasingly difficult and unpopular war,” McChrystal himself wrote in his memoir, released in early 2013. “Given all the factors involved, I wasn’t sure a successful outcome was achievable, no matter what we did,” he added in a remarkable bit of candor about the mission he oversaw. After a divisive war in Iraq, McChrystal said by mid 2009 he saw little appetite among decision makers in Washington D.C. for what he believed would be needed in Afghanistan. He also saw the unfolding policy

making process, calling it “awkward,” at best, adding that a significant amount of mutual distrust and suspicion had built up between U.S. civilian and military leaders.\(^{33}\)

This dynamic would bode poorly for policy clarity – as military officials such as McChrystal would see COIN as the only viable option, while members of Obama’s national security team would be debating the nature and scope of the mission even while military commanders were making assumptions with increased troop numbers. Before the end of the process in late 2009, the NSC would meet at least 10 times to discuss Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy, and of those meetings several would be dedicated to parsing elements of the strategy – such as specific troop numbers. The February decision was a placeholder while Obama appointed two strategy reviews – first a rushed one, then a comprehensive one. With McChrystal pressing for fully funded counterinsurgency, with as many as 80,000 troops in some plans, core assumptions were being challenged left and right. Would any of this work? Was Karzai a real partner? Was Pakistan a bigger problem? And why not just build up the Afghan Army?\(^{34}\)

As meetings progressed, divisions widened even within the Obama Administration’s war cabinet on how to proceed. Uniform military, Admiral Mullen and Petraeus, strongly supported COIN strategy and more forces, almost always bringing up the Iraq war and Petraeus’ role in stabilizing the country with the infusion

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
of tens of thousands of troops. This vision, however, was expansive and Obama was skeptical of whether or not a long-term military commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan was necessary and in American interests. The application of COIN was also presaged on another flawed comparison between Iraq and Afghanistan – in Iraq COIN was used to separate warring parties in a civil war, but in Afghanistan the task being proposed was far more difficult, as it involved convincing many of the Pashtun tribes to back the Karzai government instead of the expanding Taliban. This plan, however, failed to account for the fact that Karzai’s government was fueled by patronage and corruption. The strategy would also take years potentially, as the population would need to feel safe enough to demonstrate allegiance to the government. There were risks, but commanders downplayed them along with the costs in blood and treasure, citing the need to build legitimacy in Afghan governance – despite their real lack of consensus or understanding of what this meant.\(^\text{35}\)

Even within the military, consensus did not exist. Leaks of proposals riddled the process from January into fall 2009, as reviews led to more discussions. Marine Gen. James Cartwright, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, cobbled together an alternative plan, with input from Vice President Biden, already a skeptic of the expansive COIN mission. This proposal argued for stepped up counterterrorism raids targeting al Qaeda-linked Taliban and more trainers for the Afghan Army, rather than adding more American combat troops – an approach more in line with Nixon’s policy of “Vietnamization.” All together, this option would mean far fewer troops – around

\(^{35}\) Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 118.
20,000 troops – than McChrystal and Mullen’s grandiose COIN ideas. But Mullen
hated this alternative, and would not present this option to Obama himself. This created
tension within the Joint Chiefs of Staff as Obama sought out a detailed explanation of
this option. To Obama, the military leadership was trying to cook the options to get the
result they wanted, with military leaders arguing no small footprint counterterrorism
option would work without the expansive intelligence networks and presence of
counterinsurgency warfare. “They are not going to give me a choice,” Obama said to
an aide. Open-ended perpetual commitment of tens of thousands of troops was not
good for the country’s broader interests, he believed. By late 2009, as he closed in on a
decision for a new strategy, he now saw a military victory as an unattainable goal.
Obama instead believed he needed to create some kind of end game for America’s war,
not doubling down on a dubious commitment.36

Despite Obama’s reservations, he was still leaning towards escalation as a
means of political leverage. It would be Biden, who had visited Afghanistan just before
Obama’s inauguration and pressed McKiernan on assumptions about the war, who
would push back against Mullen, McChrystal and Petraeus in deliberations about
strategy. For example, in the aftermath of Karzai’s re-election, when doubts about his
viability as a legitimate partner would build, as cables from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul
would cast doubt on some key assumptions of the military’s COIN idea – that civilian
infrastructure could be adequately established, and that Karzai was operating in line

36 Woodward, Obama’s Wars, 236, 280.
with U.S. interests. Biden noted this in his objections. “I do not see how anyone who took part in our discussions could emerge without profound questions about counterinsurgency,” Biden wrote in a memo to Obama during deliberations on options. The military would do whatever was asked of it, Biden said. But an end state or even time frame for the COIN strategy – with a competent partner, basic governance and services and a competent Afghan military – could not be articulated by any senior military, he noted. “We simply can’t control these variables, yet they’re essential to the success of COIN.”

Unlike the strategy deliberation over Vietnam following Nixon’s victory in the 1968 presidential election, a significant factor was absent from the drawn-out discussions on Afghanistan over the course of 2009 – the aspect of diplomacy and using it to drive a negotiated political settlement. The idea of negotiations appealed to Obama, and, as soon as two months after being sworn into office, he mentioned to aides he was open to seeking reconciliation with the Taliban. He even compared such an approach to an effort the U.S. military had worked out with former militants in Iraq who were willing to walk away from al Qaeda. Obama’s sentiment, however, caused great consternation amongst his senior military team. Mullen and Petraeus, especially, believed it was too soon to talk settlement or peace. They were dogged in their desire to see a COIN strategy implemented. Only then would they talk to Taliban elements who wanted to surrender – and were not enamored with making bargaining concessions with the enemy. CIA officials argued that America could not negotiate

37 Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 126.
with the Taliban until its leaders denounced al Qaeda publicly – lest it open itself to the
possibility of making deals with terrorists.\footnote{Ibid., 224.}

As the review of options stretched over months, the military consistently
pressed Obama to expand ground forces and dismissed diplomatic solutions. As a
result of this pushback, throughout the strategy deliberations there was no discussion at
all of political settlements, according to Vali Nasr, a close aide to Richard Holbrooke –
the veteran diplomat who had been appointed by Obama to be the Special
Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP). Holbrooke was one of the few
members of Obama’s national security team who had professional experience from the
Vietnam War, as he was a young Foreign Service officer in South Vietnam early in his
career. “Holbrooke wanted the president to consider (diplomacy), but the White House
was not buying it,” Nasr wrote in an article detailing his experiences with Holbrooke.
“The military wanted to stay in charge, and going against the military would make the
president look weak.”\footnote{Vali Nasr, “The Inside Story of How the White House Let Diplomacy Fail in Afghanistan,”
\textit{Foreign Policy Magazine}, March-April, 2013,
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/04/the_inside_story_of_how_the_white_house_let_diplomacy_fail_in_afghanistan (accessed March 7, 2013).}

Despite his personal reservations, Obama and his closest advisors were keen on
political perceptions – he decided, in the end, to give the military what it asked for and
forego a formal diplomatic strategy. Months of debate, proposals and dissent from
skeptics, such as Biden, led to a final meeting of the war cabinet on November 29, 2009 where Obama announced his final decision on war strategy. Biden, Mullen, Cartwright, Gates, Petraeus and several others took their seats, and Obama told the assembly he would sign the orders to send 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan – a compromise between a number McChrystal had submitted (40,000) and Biden’s proposed plan for 20,000. Gates would have authority to add up to 3,000 if needed under exceptional circumstances.⁴⁰

Obama, however, would attach significant conditions to the new troop increase – detailed in a six-page memo with the decision. The most important condition was that U.S. forces heading to Afghanistan – beginning after a nationally televised speech from West Point on December 1, 2009 – would begin coming home in July 2011, meaning the escalation would peak after roughly 18 months. The senior military officials pressing for COIN forces told the president U.S. troops could clear areas of Taliban fighters and turn over responsibility of these regions to Afghan troops anywhere from 18 to 24 months – Obama took the low estimate and set a deadline. He believed a deadline, which he would announce in his speech, would put pressure on Karzai to work more quickly to build his government and security forces and lessen the American burden of the war, and would prevent a slow escalation and even slower reductions. He took pains to tell his cabinet he was not endorsing nation building, as the forces would participate in combat operations in some areas and build governance

⁴⁰ Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 128.
in others. “This is not full-blown counterinsurgency,” Obama said, vowing he would not get drawn into a never-ending war.\(^41\)

On December 1, 2009, Obama appeared before the cadets of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, to announce his surge of forces in a televised address. By the end of 2010, he said in his speech, America would send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan to combat Taliban forces, to seize the initiative, and build up Afghan forces to take over the war. “These are the resources that we need… while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan,” Obama declared. Despite his reservations about the political utility of counterinsurgency, the president would escalate the Afghan war with thousands more American soldiers, in order to find some way to end it.\(^42\)

The military surge into Afghanistan would begin only weeks after Obama’s December 2009 speech, a bid not to secure victory but to transition the war to the Afghan government of Karzai, and give America political cover to leave. In the months following Obama’s speech, American forces poured into Afghanistan. Though the president sought to limit the scope of the counterinsurgency mission, the military pushed forward in earnest with COIN, intent on pressing the Taliban militarily into a weaker position. From December 2009 through the summer of 2011, when reductions

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan 1 December 2009.”
of U.S. troops began, well over 100,000 U.S., NATO and Afghan government troops were mobilized and mainly spread across Afghanistan’s southern and eastern provinces – from the Taliban’s one time stronghold of Kandahar to the mountains along the Pakistani border, according to COIN proponent Petraeus. The rapid increase of military presence took away areas of strength from the Taliban, areas they had slowly encroached back into since the U.S. invasion in 2001. “Forces went on the offensive and took away from the Taliban areas that matter enormously to them,” said Petraeus in a telephone interview in May 2011. Petraeus would step down from the command of CENTCOM and take over the war effort in Afghanistan in June 2010, in the aftermath of McChrystal’s forced resignation. McChrystal and his staff had made disparaging comments of Vice President Biden and other administration officials months earlier, which had surfaced in a media interview. Three different generals would command U.S. forces in Afghanistan over the course of less than 18 months.

From Kandahar to the Helmand River Valley, one-time strongholds were cleared of Taliban militants through great effort – with fighting ebbing and rising alternately across the country, particularly in the south and along the porous border with Pakistan. Even with support from Pakistani intelligence, Taliban militias were battered by tens of thousands more American troops spreading across the southern half of Afghanistan. As conditions changed, and U.S. troops flooded areas such as Helmand

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44 Ibid.
Province and Kandahar, once redoubts of Taliban influence, Taliban commanders shifted strategies. Obama had vowed to start withdrawing troops by July 2011, and NATO had subsequently promised it would wrap up its primary combat mission by 2014. Mullah Abdul Qayyum Zakir, the Taliban’s military deputy at the time of the surge, decided to shift strategy. Instead of trying to control territory, he played a long game – hold out for a few more years, recruit enough soldiers and save enough funds and supplies until the Americans would leave and the war would continue against the Karzai government in Kabul. Taliban fighters would occasionally stage assassinations and ambushes in areas around Kandahar, reminding Afghans that the U.S. troops were not the decisive victors in the war just yet. Consequently, Pakistani intelligence agents looked for points of weakness in the surge strategy. With the bulk of American forces tied up in the south of Afghanistan, they increased support for the Taliban in the east, along the border – led by the ferocious veteran of the war against the Soviets, Jalaluddin Haqqani, and his Haqqani Network.45

By early 2011, the sheer scope of the surge was visible across the country’s east and south, as American forward bases popped up far away from population centers, such as Kabul and Kandahar. At one remote outpost in the country’s Paktika Province, a stone’s throw from the Pakistani border, one Army officer described regular contact with well-equipped and motivated Taliban forces trying to infiltrate back into Afghanistan with supplies for their comrades. The province is rural, with rugged mountains and few maintained roads, and Taliban fighters moved and attacked U.S.

45 Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 293.
troops in varying patterns, as the weather would turn from winter to spring. “The enemy in this area is professional,” said Maj. Mark Houston, in an interview during a visit to a forward operating base near the town of Orgun-e in Paktika. Taliban militants watch weather patterns carefully, he said, and some have been killed or captured with highly sophisticated equipment, such as night vision goggles, heavy machine guns, advanced explosives and other accoutrements – which intelligence believed originated from Pakistan. A veteran of multiple combat tours by early 2011, he noted that Taliban elements would occasionally mount brazen infantry attacks on isolated bases when weather was bad, preventing air support from being fully utilized. “They respect two things – firepower and the high ground,” Houston said. The border areas are vast, he added, and stopping infiltration is a hard task, and nearly impossible without air support.46

The dynamic of sanctuaries in Pakistan would prove a serious factor in the conduct of military operations from late 2009 to the end of the surge even while the U.S. troops would severely batter the Taliban militarily. The persistence of Taliban fighters in the border areas and in the south is expected, Petraeus noted in his May 2011 interview. “The Taliban has fought back, and doesn’t want to give up their gains without a fight,” he said. “This is all quite predictable because there are challenges, in

that there are sanctuaries outside Afghanistan, from which… (Taliban fighters) can regenerate and infiltrate back and cause problems for Afghan forces and civilians.”

Still, U.S. commanders were determined to press the Taliban – and in many ways succeeded at this limited aim, as the surge continued to grow in size. In one telling metric, in the year from June 2010 to June 2011, U.S. military aircraft flew over 5,800 bombing and strafing sorties in Afghanistan against the Taliban – a nearly 65 percent increase from the year before. For hearts-and-minds styled COIN warfare, it was a veritable explosion in violence – especially since it was under the command of noted COIN champion Petraeus. Raids on Taliban officials spiked during that period as well, and villages believed to be centers of Taliban activity were destroyed by U.S. offensives. Unmanned airplanes, known commonly as “drones,” targeted Taliban militants increasingly in this time period as well, in a campaign of assassination by the CIA in the Pakistani borderlands.

From a military standpoint, the offensive was by and large successful, but metrics on success in a counterinsurgency war are often difficult to agree upon – and were debated thoroughly through the offensive’s prosecution. The United Nations

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47 Petraeus, author interview, May 2011.


49 Ibid.
mission in Afghanistan, for example, reported data by late 2011 showing violent incidents of all types were up 40 percent in Afghanistan that year from 2010. At the same time, NATO and U.S. reports detailed an eight percent decline in 2011 through the last months of summer, a downward trend Petraeus echoed in his May 2011 interview as well.\(^{50}\) These factors indicated there was reason for cautious U.S. optimism about military gains by the time Obama had vowed to begin withdrawing forces in summer 2011, per defense analyst Michael O’Hanlon. While UN statistics lumped combat and war deaths with violent crime unrelated to fighting, the important factor was the perception by Afghans of the tide of war. By early 2011, despite the increase in war deaths due to fighting, a tenuous shift in Afghan opinion had occurred as former Taliban strongholds were taken over by Americans and their Afghan allies, giving hope to civilians in these areas. But the military gains were only part of the solution, as pressure was building for America to turn over the burden of war to the government of Karzai.\(^{51}\)

Unlike Nixon’s diplomatic efforts to wind down American involvement in the Vietnam War, Obama, in contrast, gave no indication he had factored diplomacy into his surge strategy. Instead, Obama allowed the Pentagon to dictate policy aims by and large – focused on counterinsurgency solutions. The Pentagon and military leaders had downplayed outreach efforts early on in the process, and while some contacts had been

\(^{50}\) Petraeus, author interview, May 2011.

made via Karzai’s government, the consensus amongst Obama’s national security team was to wait and see. Obama’s attitude, and those of his advisors, was bent on building up Karzai’s government and battering the Taliban. But, as time wore on, a shift occurred within the military command of U.S. troops in Afghanistan. While both Mullen and Petraeus were hard against ideas such as reconciliation as the bombs poured down and more and more Taliban officials were killed or captured, McChrystal and his staff began to warm to the idea of a negotiated settlement, while he was still in charge of the Afghan war. One of McChrystal’s advisors, Army Colonel Chris Kolenda, began to research why Afghans were fighting in an effort to get low-level fighters to put down their arms, explaining annual taped messages from the Taliban’s leader, Mullah Omar, were growing increasingly sophisticated, and detailed themes such as reform, justice, and participation in Afghan government (some themes Taliban commanders themselves would bring up in interviews). Kolenda had figured out that Holbrooke could be approached as an ally in getting the White House’s support, and by spring of 2010, Holbrooke and McChrystal were talking regularly about ways to achieve reconciliation. By this point “McChrystal became a believer,” Chandrasekaran noted in his book – as the general realized the United States would not be able to secure an outright military victory in Afghanistan, and the Afghan government would not be able to get an outright political victory. Negotiation and potential peace talks were the only way out of Afghanistan for America and the only real solution for the conflict. Much like Nixon’s approach to the Paris Talks, McChrystal was not ready to let up militarily on the Taliban by early 2010 just yet, but instructed his staff to prepare
briefings for Karzai on reconciliation efforts. He also said he was “on board” with talking to the Taliban – but in June, McChrystal was forced to resign. When Petraeus arrived, he ordered a stop to all reconciliation activities, telling his subordinates if America applied enough pressure, the Taliban’s fighters would switch sides in droves. Petraeus ignored the signs a strategic diplomatic settlement could be achieved, and instead focused on expanding his war. As the numbers above suggest, Petraeus followed through on his threat to squeeze the Taliban militarily – escalating violence across the country in his first year in command.52

The chance to forge a reconciliation agreement with the Taliban, even if it was in its infancy, was never capitalized upon by U.S. military leaders. Indeed, in McChrystal’s post war memoir, he echoes his belief in the reconciliation process during his time commanding the war. “I never thought we’d crush the Taliban in a conventional military sense,” he wrote. “I hoped to defeat it by making it irrelevant: We’d do so through limiting its ability to influence the lives and welfare of the Afghans, and reducing the grievances that pushed recruits to its ranks,” he added – directly reflecting some of the motivations Taliban commanders themselves have since expressed. The U.S. would fail if it did not craft “realistic avenues” for Taliban fighters and those supporting them to reconcile with the government in safety, McChrystal believed.53 By May 2011, however, even Petraeus himself was conceding the need for

52 Chandrasekaran, Little America, 234.

53 McChrystal, My Share of the Task, 353.
low-level reconciliation activities, due to political pressures in America and in Afghanistan. While emphasizing the importance of raids on Taliban leaders and joint operations with Afghan troops, in an interview, Petraeus repeatedly mentioned “reintegration” – or the efforts to get Taliban fighters to disarm and abandon the war against Karzai’s government. “Our effort is by no means defined by (combat),” he said, noting by May 2011 some 1,700 former Taliban had “integrated back into society” with another 2,000 ready to lay down arms.⁵⁴ Still, Petraeus’ view of this process was not one of negotiation and bargaining – but more akin to accepting surrender from Taliban leadership. Kolenda, and other McChrystal aides noted the Taliban still had a functional sanctuary in Pakistan, the recruiting advantage of fighting a “radioactive” government in Kabul, and a weak Pakistani government in Islamabad unwilling to put pressure on ISI support for some elements of the Taliban. Kolenda attempted to change Petraeus’ mind, but Petraeus wouldn’t entertain negotiations with the enemy leadership. “We’re squandering our point of maximum leverage,” Kolenda told a friend after he had given up and returned to the Pentagon from Kabul.⁵⁵

Obama would not fight for a diplomatic strategy in the surge, and his military leaders were all too convinced their COIN efforts would succeed. If there was any one person who believed in the prospect of shepherding a peace deal out of the surge, and articulated it as time wore on, it was Holbrooke. In the Clinton Administration,

⁵⁴ Petraeus, author interview, May 2011.

⁵⁵ Chandrasekaran, Little America, 235.
Holbrooke had cajoled, arm-twisted and bargained a peace deal during the Bosnian Civil War. But, from the beginning of Holbrooke’s appointment as the Afghanistan-Pakistan envoy at the State Department, there were problems. For example, he clashed frequently with Obama’s political advisors, and was seen as too close to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (who had been defeated by Obama in the Democratic Party’s presidential primary in 2008). “The president never met with Holbrooke outside large meetings and never gave him time and heard him out,” said one of Holbrooke’s former aides, Vali Nasr. Holbrooke could be a difficult personality, but throughout the surge, it seemed that those who ran White House decision making were more interested in making sure Holbrooke did not succeed than getting policy right.56

Holbrooke, like Biden, was thoroughly skeptical of the military’s COIN schemes – but was not sold on a stepped up “counterterrorism” plan, featuring raids and targeted airstrikes. At no point in the deliberations for what to do during the surge was the possibility of a diplomatic settlement broached, Nasr notes, but once troops were pouring in to Afghanistan, Holbrooke’s calculus shifted, and he wanted to use the military pressure as diplomatic leverage, sooner than later. “The commanders’ standard response was that they needed two more fighting seasons to soften up the Taliban,” Nasr recalled – adding they were hoping to change Obama’s mind on his July 2011 deadline to accept a more casual withdrawal plan. The standard position of the White House and Obama’s military leaders was that the fighting should come first, and the

talking later. Holbrooke, who was 20 years older than Obama, had personal memories of the Vietnam War. Holbrooke’s experiences formed a perspective on the diplomatic aspect of the surge that could have come right out of the strategy deliberations of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho as they confronted Nixon’s machinations in Southeast Asia 40 years earlier. “Holbrooke thought we could talk and fight. Reconciliation should be the ultimate goal, and fighting the means to facilitate it,” Nasr recollected.57

Despite the support of Clinton and her direct access to Obama, she couldn’t get the President to agree to negotiations. Obama was sympathetic, but skittish about perceptions of weakness in the war. By then, others had lobbied the U.S. for talks but went nowhere. As early as July 2009, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sent a message to Obama asking him to send a trusted official to meet with a group of Taliban emissaries who were speaking with their intelligence service. By then, the chief of the Saudi intelligence agency had already met with the U.S. ambassador and the CIA station chief in Riyadh to discuss the meeting. When word reached Holbrooke, there was disagreement about how serious the offer was amongst his staff, but he thought it was a lead worth pursuing. The offer, instead, would be bottled up by Obama’s staff on the National Security Council – and go nowhere.58

This was only the first of many dead ends for Holbrooke’s diplomacy efforts. The White House did not issue clear policy on reconciliation during Obama’s first two

57 Ibid.

years in office, all the way into early 2011, when the surge was mere months away from beginning a drawdown. Some of Obama’s advisors, such as White House advisor Lute, disliked Holbrooke intensely, believing he was an egotist, and hated the idea of him getting a diplomatic win on par with his work in the Balkans again. The result of all this dissent and discord was stark – Obama failed to aggressively explore negotiations with elements of the Taliban, either directly or through intermediaries, when the U.S. had the most troops in country, battering its enemies.\footnote{Ibid.}

Over a year and a half after Holbrooke’s office penned its first memo outlining ways to get the Taliban to come to the table for Clinton to bring to Obama, did she finally get the green light to publicly endorse a diplomatic strategy for the Afghan war. Clinton announced the new policy publicly in a February 2011 speech at the Asia Society in New York. The Obama Administration, Clinton said, in consultation with its allies would begin to reduce its troop presence in Afghanistan in the coming months – with the goal of ending its combat mission in the country by 2014.\footnote{Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society’s Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses, February 18, 2011” Asia Society, New York, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. State Department, Secretary of State, 2011), http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm (accessed March, 2013).} “As transition proceeds… a process of political reconciliation will become increasingly viable,” she said in her Asia Society speech. The Taliban had been damaged by security gains of the military, creating an opportunity to get serious about a “responsible reconciliation
process,” marking the first time the U.S. would openly endorse a diplomatic track to ending its participation in the Afghan war. Clinton also unveiled a shift in U.S. war policy in her speech. Long time preconditions for the Taliban before talks would occur – renouncing violence, abandoning its ties with al Qaeda and abiding by the Afghan government’s constitution – were no longer preconditions but rather “necessary outcomes of any negotiation.” The Taliban could now come to the negotiating table, as the movement currently existed and operated. It was a development Holbrooke had long advocated for but would not see for himself – as the veteran diplomat fell ill at a meeting at the State Department on December 11, 2010, dying two days later from complications from a torn aorta.  

The diplomatic offensive never came. Only months later, a U.S. military raid into Pakistan would find and kill the al Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden, lessening public pressure to show military dividends in Afghanistan – giving Obama political cover to publicly commit to transitioning his surge troops back home before the November 2012 election. This decision effectively snatched any remaining leverage away if diplomacy was to have success at all. This led to bemusement from diplomats across South Asia and the Middle East trying to understand how America would get out of Afghanistan by forfeiting its advantage. “If you are leaving, why would the Taliban make a deal with you?” one Arab diplomat reportedly told some U.S. State Department officials from the SRAP office. “The Taliban will talk to you, but just to

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61 Ibid.
get you out faster.” In the wake of bin Laden’s death, any talks with the Taliban were not about arranging surrender but rather speeding America’s exit from Afghanistan.

“The White House seemed to see an actual benefit in not doing too much,” Nasr recalls of the months following the “shift” in policy. Relations with Pakistan had also sharply worsened, as bin Laden’s death in a unilateral American military operation into Pakistani territory made certain the country would be in no mood to accommodate U.S. reconciliation efforts with the Taliban. The Obama Administration, it seemed, did not terribly care about the lack of diplomacy at this point. “(The Obama White House) was happy with its narrative of modest success in Afghanistan and gradual withdrawal – building Afghan security forces to take over from departing U.S. troops,” Nasr said.62

As 2011 became 2012, the American military surge wound down. By September 21, 2012, the last of Obama’s surge troops came home. When the time came to publicly announce the end of the operation, there was no grand speech in Washington D.C. or Kabul but a short statement read by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, traveling to visit his counterpart in Auckland, New Zealand. American troops had now drawn down to less than 68,000 in Afghanistan, with further reductions on the way, Panetta said, and the moment was a chance to realize that the surge “did accomplish its objectives” as laid out in Obama’s December 2009 West Point speech. America, Panetta said, had struck “enormous blows” against al Qaeda leadership, and

had largely succeeded in “disrupting, dismantling and defeating al Qaeda and denying it a safe haven.”\textsuperscript{63}

A few days before Panetta’s announcement, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Martin Dempsey, Mullen’s successor, said the surge was “an effort worth the cost.” Evidence, even by then, was already accumulating that Dempsey and Panetta’s assessments were optimistic at best. The cost, to America alone, was significant, journalist Chandrasekaran reported. In the aftermath of Obama’s decision to escalate the war in December 2009 to September 2012, over 1,100 American troops died in Afghanistan, with the cost of combat operations in 2011 – the peak of the surge – over $100 billion that year alone.\textsuperscript{64}

Evidence already suggested by September 2012, that many of the assumptions that drove Obama to authorize the surge proved faulty or exaggerated, with Panetta echoing one of the prime miscalculations in his speech marking the end of the operation – the belief in the presence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan. First noted by Biden in his first trip to Afghanistan as Vice President, the actual presence of al Qaeda in Afghanistan was minimal – with most of the fighters fleeing to the ungoverned sanctuaries of Pakistan’s border provinces. While large swaths of southern Afghanistan were cleared of Taliban fighters by U.S. troops, the Taliban had also not been defeated – but merely went into hiding. “It did not matter much to the generals that most of al


\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
Qaeda’s remaining core was in Pakistan,” Chandrasekaran writes, where they were targeted not by American troops and their COIN campaign, but by covert CIA drone airstrikes. The military’s favorite argument to back up their COIN ideas was that without thousands of U.S. troops on the ground, the human intelligence necessary to find Taliban and al Qaeda leaders would not materialize — and this turned out to be a dubious argument when evaluating the surge aftermath. In actuality, most of the intelligence used in military raids and drone strikes (in both Afghanistan and Pakistan) was gathered from traditional signals intercepts, electronic monitoring of phone conversations and communications, and not tips from local citizens passing along information to soldiers. This intelligence work led to the information that eventually killed Osama bin Laden, and did not require the massive investment of manpower and blood demanded by COIN.  

The surge was also built upon the premise that a strong and accountable government in Kabul would lead to defeat of the Taliban and its al Qaeda allies, an assumption that proved dreadfully wrong. The failure of the surge to give political credibility to the Karzai government was in no small part due to Karzai’s dislike and antipathy towards COIN, as he saw the effort as disruptive towards his domestic patronage network and self-regulating system of Afghan governance. Karzai wanted his U.S. backers to focus on stopping his Taliban enemies from infiltrating back into the country, not to try and build governance and accountability in some broad nation-building project. Indeed, analysts such as Mark Schrecker predicted this failure, when

65 Ibid.
he wrote: “counterinsurgency will fail in Afghanistan, not for lack of determination… It will fail because the interests of America and its allies diverge from those of the current Afghan government.” Karzai’s number one interest, he continued, is not helping America succeed in its COIN war, but “keeping Karzai in power.” It is no accident then, as the surge went on, the more sceptical and paranoid Karzai would become towards his American patrons who sought to bolster good governance at the expense of his power.66

Lastly, and most importantly, one set of perspectives and assumptions proved largely correct – those of the Taliban’s leadership and its military commanders. As soon as Obama confirmed he would be pulling back the troop surge, the Taliban had adapted tactics and moved from areas where they were to face a large presence of American troops. In a bid to outlast the surge, the Taliban also used the presence of foreign troops as a recruitment tool. Several Taliban officials and intermediaries confirmed in 2012 interviews that a driving force behind the Taliban’s continued willingness to fight was to expel foreign forces – and most importantly, they believed time was on their side and eventually America would tire of the war.67 According to close intermediaries with Taliban leadership, while the senior leaders of the Taliban talk about continued military action against foreign troops and Karzai, they realize that


this is not enough to “win,” and more effort is needed to build economic power and garner increased support to succeed. As this is the case, in the right circumstances, Taliban leadership would support a cease-fire.  

These attitudes of the Taliban leadership were never exploited at any point during the surge, due to Obama’s desire to avoid the perception of weakness – despite an opportunity to play the Taliban against their one-time associates in the al Qaeda movement diplomatically. While Biden and other American officials would point out the disconnect between the Taliban in Afghanistan and al Qaeda – the main target of the campaign – a prime opportunity to utilize diplomacy to split the two groups from each other came and went with the passage of the surge, according to interviews with Taliban officials and intermediaries. Confirming perspectives gathered by Waldman in his USIP interviews with Taliban militants, more recent interviews with Taliban officials indicate the leadership considers the renunciation of support for al Qaeda as “a given” in any negotiations on future power sharing in Afghanistan. Strong feelings exist in senior levels of the Taliban movement regarding al Qaeda and its role in the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which could have been exploited during the surge. “We hold al Qaeda responsible for wrecking our work to create an Islamic state in Afghanistan,” a former Taliban deputy minister and founding member of the movement said.  

68 Ibid., 8.  

69 Ibid., 5-7.  

70 Ibid.
The strategic calculus of the surge, unlike Nixon’s bombing campaigns in 1972, failed to create favorable conditions for reconciliation for all these reasons, and by the end of 2012 – months after the surge ended – no real progress in negotiations had taken place. With the leverage of American military force lessening by the day, diplomatic openings grow even scarcer. According to an October 2012 report in the New York Times, American officials have decided to all but abandon efforts to pressure the Taliban into a peace deal. Once ambitious plans pressed for by officials such as Holbrooke have been replaced with efforts by American military officials in Afghanistan and in Washington D.C. to set the stage for the Afghans to work out a deal among themselves after most U.S. forces leave by 2014.71

As the war continues, new revelations are coming to light about the Obama Administration’s failure to adequately utilize the tools of diplomacy – during the surge and in its aftermath – to gain a favorable exit from Afghanistan. U.S. and NATO officials working in Afghanistan now believe any significant progress in reconciliation will come after foreign forces depart. American officials confirm what Petraeus had pushed in his views – that escalated military operations were part of a strategy to force concessions from the Taliban, but not necessarily to negotiate with them. Preliminary talks based in Qatar in 2011 belatedly set up through backchannels, according to the Times, did not play out as Obama was unwilling to commit political capital to a proposed prisoner swap – several Taliban officials at the prison at Guantanamo Bay,

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Cuba, in exchange for an Army sergeant long held prisoner by the Taliban. Divisions between the Taliban had flared when the talks came to light in comments made by Karzai, according to one former Taliban official, which the Taliban still refuse to negotiate with. In a telling parallel with Thieu’s obstinacy in the waning weeks of 1972 towards the Paris Talks, Karzai’s outing of even preliminary talks confirms again his interests and those of the United States are not aligned when it comes to reconciliation.

In hindsight, it appears rather than seeking to avoid further entanglement, the surge only served to complicate planning for Afghanistan in the aftermath of America’s exit. According to a sampling of interviews from Taliban officials, the lack of insight into motivations, goals and aims of the movement has seriously damaged the U.S. policymaking process since Obama’s election. Indeed, the 2012 Royal United Services Institute academic interviews of Taliban officials disclose clearly the Taliban have no real problem with the concept of a representative government, or distancing themselves from al Qaeda, but rather seek some form of religious or clerical role in the government. Because of this and other factors, according to a former Taliban political minister close to Mullah Omar, the Taliban “cannot support a government run by Karzai,” whom they see as weak, feckless and not able to include a honest coalition of Afghan society. The Taliban, the officials claim, is very concerned about the country

72 Ibid.

73 Semple, “Taliban Perspectives on Reconciliation,” 8.
fragmenting into war and chaos again. One former Taliban minister suggested it would need U.S. assistance to continue to hold the Afghan Army together in a post-war scenario – the Afghan Army the U.S. has invested much time and money building up under Karzai’s government. One of the Taliban’s founders suggested there was and is no natural enmity between the Taliban and America, and that his movement had originally looked to America for advice in the late 1990s, during international conferences on rebuilding the country after its long civil war. On all occasions, the Taliban official said, their advances were spurned.74

74 Ibid.
CHAPTER IV:

CONCLUSION: THE “LIMITS OF OUR CAPABILITIES”

While suffering setbacks, military stalemate and popular discontent at home, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger were able to manipulate, cajole and force through military might and superpower diplomacy the conditions necessary to resume peace talks in Paris by January 1973. These talks would lead to the signing of the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam on January 27, 1973, better known as the Paris Accords. In contrast, Barack Obama, determined at first to increase military pressure on the enemies of Hamid Karzai’s government to pave America’s path out of Afghanistan, agreed to a massive surge of military troops into Afghanistan from late 2009 until September 2012. By the end of this period, however, the surge failed to produce tangible results. Despite the surge, and following disjointed and belated efforts to manipulate some kind of diplomatic solution, one did not materialize – with the prospects of peace today in the Afghan war appearing more distant.

The aim and scope of this concluding chapter is to highlight the results from these two eras of conflict, first from events in the Vietnam War in 1972 then secondly from Obama’s surge in the Afghan conflict from 2009 to 2012 — the similarities, the differences and the lessons to be drawn. Why did one lead to the conditions for a historic “peace” by the end of 1972, whereas another failed to achieve a similar objective by September 2012, despite both periods involving the use of military force to influence diplomatic openings? The organization of this chapter is in four parts; the
first will examine the results of both periods studied. The second part will highlight the similarities in the assumptions, decisions and actions during both the year 1972 in the Vietnam War and the surge of 2009-2012 in the Afghan war. Thirdly, this chapter will illustrate the key differences between the two presidents and their handling of their wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The fourth section will then end by presenting the lessons learned which are relevant to policy makers, researchers and scholars today.

In the aftermath of the events of 1972, only weeks would pass before the signing of the Paris Accords, but in studying the events preceding their signing, a telling anecdote is revealed about the perception of Le Duc Tho’s perception of his bargaining partner in Lien-Hang Nguyen’s research on the Vietnam War. In a Vietnamese language biography of Tho, the tale is relayed of the first meeting between the steely revolutionary and Nixon’s new representative to the Paris Talks, Henry Kissinger, on a chilly February 21, 1970 in a suburb outside Paris. Kissinger, Tho recalled, was quite different from his patrician predecessors – an immigrant, and a professor who had risen to the top of academia and government in the United States. Tho’s approach to Kissinger, the VWP official reasoned, would be to disregard his skill in argument, since ultimate success for the North’s revolutionary cause lay with just one factor – patience. To back up his philosophy, he quoted from the famous Vietnamese poem *Truyen Kieu*, a passage which roughly translates to: “wait a little while,/ sooner or later the result will be the same the following year so why hurry?” In
the end, Tho believed, the results would be the same whether he forced them or bided his time.¹

In Vietnam by the end of 1972, diplomacy offered both the North Vietnamese and Nixon the avenue to buy time to shore up their battlefield struggles and strengthen their respective allies. A settlement, nearly within reach, was scuttled by America’s ostensible ally in Saigon, and as 1972 crept to an end, the final violent chapter of America’s war in Vietnam – the Linebacker II campaign – proved the decisive event in setting conditions for a return to the Paris Talks. But even after the bombs stopped falling on Hanoi, and Kissinger and Tho hashed out the final outlines of a deal in the weeks before the signing of the Accords, Thieu would continue to register objections and remain defiant, especially towards the possibility of North Vietnamese troops remaining in South Vietnam. Nixon would extend carrots in the form of aid assurances to Thieu and to the North Vietnamese in the first weeks of 1973, giving secret assurances to Saigon the U.S. would intervene again with its military might if the North violated any agreement. Nixon also promised to normalize relations with Hanoi and extend post-war reconstruction assistance should an acceptable agreement materialize. Nixon, in a taped conversation with Kissinger in early January 1973 when the pair discussed the negotiations with Thieu, said the RVN president was living in a “dream world” if he thought he could stop an agreement and still get aid – as Congress was pushing harder to suspend war funds for South Vietnam. While bombing had

severely set back Hanoi’s war machine, Nixon believed Thieu was being completely unrealistic in his demands that no communist troops remain in the South after any deal.²

As January 1973 progressed however, Nixon’s patience with Thieu wore thinner. In a telling prelude of events to come, Nixon decided he was done haggling with Thieu, and in a private January 17, 1973 letter – 10 days before the signing of the Accords – Nixon told the RVN leader he intended to proceed with the signing of an agreement, whether Thieu acceded or not. In addition to a list of assurances, Nixon vowed Thieu’s “overall political and security position has been bolstered in many ways” before a ceasefire would take effect. The alternative to the deal, Nixon added, would be a cutoff of aid to the RVN – as Congress would be meeting soon, and was actively pushing on defunding all military aid to South Vietnam. “Thus we have only one decision before us: whether or not to continue in peacetime the close partnership that has served us so well in war,” Nixon wrote, spelling out terms of the proposed agreement, and adding assurance of support in the event of attack in the future. Thieu would relent on January 21, and six days later, the accords were signed.³

² Oval Office 831-3; January 3, 1973; Nixon Conversation with Kissinger on December Bombings, Thieu and Negotiations; White House Tapes; NL, NA, Yorba Linda, California.

Nixon’s promises to friend and foe, it would turn out, would not be honored for multiple reasons. The decisiveness of the Linebacker campaigns, in the end, was due to their political aims, not their military utility, aims very specific for Nixon’s purposes by the close of 1972. After years of research on both U.S. and Vietnamese sources, scholar Pierre Asselin noted that the “peace” achieved in Paris in January 1973 was merely in the eye of the beholder. To America, it served as the tool by which it ended its long and indecisive military engagement in Vietnam. To the North, it served as the device to get America to end its involvement in the war, when military force failed to do so.\textsuperscript{4}

Linebacker II, and then the Paris Accords, gave Nixon what he wanted – an honorable exit, as he saw it, from Vietnam on American terms. But the peace doomed Thieu’s government in Saigon – as the promised protection from military assault in Nixon’s letter never materialized.\textsuperscript{5} A significant factor in the aftermath of the Paris Accords on the fate of the “peace” and Thieu’s promised aid would be American domestic politics. In April 1973 the first revelations of what would become the Watergate Scandal would come to light, and would preoccupy Nixon for the rest of his term.\textsuperscript{6} By August 1974, Nixon himself would be forced to resign the Presidency in the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Lewis Sorley, \textit{A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years In Vietnam} (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 362.
\end{itemize}
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aftermath of the Watergate revelations – leaving Thieu with no patron, and opening questions for future generations as to what might have happened if Nixon remained in the Presidency.\textsuperscript{7}

The Paris Accords secured America’s exit from the Vietnam War, but since it was a peace signed under duress its limited purposes would doom the other two parties, North and South Vietnam, to further conflict. While Kissinger had secured an agreement acceptable to the Nixon Administration, and by early February 1973 was even discussing the normalization of diplomatic relations with Hanoi, the “peace” was already coming undone. By February 26, during a meeting of the Paris agreement parties, the representatives from the North and South became engaged in arguments, each accusing the other side of violations of the agreement. Within a month of the arguments, areas of South Vietnam were again seeing fighting between guerillas, the South Vietnamese and even PAVN military units – rendering the cease-fire less than effective. While fighting would ease by late spring, and U.S. prisoners would board airplanes for home, Thieu’s government refused to arrange elections. By July, the North Vietnamese Central Committee would recommend the gradual escalation of political and military activity in the South. Thus began the chain of events that would lead to the resignation of Thieu on April 21, 1975, and the fall of Saigon to the PAVN nine days later.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{8} Asselin, \textit{A Bitter Peace}, 185-187.
It can be reasonably argued that the circumstances of 1972 led to “success” for Nixon in Paris in January 1973 – but only because he had defined his political goals so narrowly. From his superpower diplomacy with the Soviets and China, to his “Vietnamization” program, to his steady drawdown of American troops from Southeast Asia, Nixon understood his presidency would be judged by his ability to remove America from its entanglement in Vietnam and this drove his policy relentlessly in his first term. By 1972, Nixon faced a unique set of circumstances in the aftermath of the North’s bid for victory with its spring offensive – and sought to secure a peace that at the very least would provide an honorable exit for America from Vietnam, and provide for what would turn out to be temporary assurances to his allies in the RVN.\(^9\)

These circumstances explained why Nixon used American airpower to such great utility for his political ends in Paris, especially the intense but short-lived assault of Linebacker II in the waning days of 1972. These bombing campaigns, which targeted the strategic nerve center of North Vietnam in Hanoi and the Haiphong harbor complex, and earlier in 1972 the invading PAVN Army formations pouring into South Vietnam, greatly altered the calculus of the parties in Paris, airpower historian and critic Mark Clodfelter concedes. By 1972, four years after the Tet Offensive, the nature of the war had changed. The Vietcong was largely decimated by South Vietnamese government efforts by this point, and the only potent military force, which could deliver Le Duan and the VWP’s goal of unification of the country by military means,

was the North Vietnamese Army, the PAVN.\textsuperscript{10} As a result of its all-out Easter Offensive, the PAVN and its support networks, logistics, trucks and depots were vulnerable to American bombs like never before. Heavy U.S. bombing, both of the North’s army and the its nerve center in Hanoi, threatened more than the North’s ability to win, Clodfelter observes, but also its ability to ultimately defend itself.\textsuperscript{11}

While Nixon won a “peace,” in the long run he could not enforce it – and Le Duan and Le Duc Tho bided their time. The domestic pressures on Nixon and Congress’ limitation on his war powers in Vietnam insured American airpower would not threaten the North again. Moreover, as a result of Linebacker II, the aerial assault bought Thieu’s regime just over two more years of life. “Since the Politburo’s aim had been to arrive at an agreement without further damage to its war effort… Linebacker II represented the failure to attain that goal,” Nguyen writes of the VWP’s view of the events at the end of 1972. Much like the lines from \textit{Truyen Kieu} that Le Duc Tho recalled when meeting Kissinger years earlier, the North may have had its intentions temporarily foiled – but all it needed to do was wait a little while longer until it could bid for victory again.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 299.
While Nixon would succeed in his limited aims to extract America from Vietnam, Obama would see few tangible results in the aftermath of his military surge – either diplomatically or militarily. Obama’s December 2009 announcement of the military surge came with the caveat that America had no interest in fighting an “endless war,” but he still failed to solidly define the goals of his strategy. Instead Obama promised the surge would disrupt and degrade the Taliban and al Qaeda, build up the Afghan armed forces and give time for a “responsible transition” for America from Afghanistan. Because of Obama’s views on analogies to America’s war in Vietnam, he dismissed comparisons of the Afghan conflict with Nixon’s Vietnam as a “false reading of history” in his speech unveiling his surge, citing the presence of America’s NATO allies, the absence of a “broad based insurgency,” and the fact that America had been “viciously attacked” by al Qaeda from Afghanistan.  

However Obama would fail where Nixon had largely succeeded, if only because his goals did not match the political reality of his presidency. Obama had reservations about an expanded military mission, as did several of his close advisors – including his Vice President Joe Biden. But Obama wound up agreeing to a narrative largely constructed and constantly reinforced by his senior military leadership – from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Michael Mullen to commanders McChrystal then Petraeus. The narrative was simple – only a surge of military force and a COIN

campaign would produce the desired results, give the Karzai government time to build its strength, and allow the U.S. the space to dictate a peace. While claiming in his speech that the cause of the Afghan war was just and his resolve “unwavering,” Obama’s addition of a timeline to the strategy further undermined any potential strategic gain – it telegraphed to his enemies and friends alike that America’s commitment was strong, but on a timer.\(^\text{14}\)

Over the course of the surge, commanders would change, and even the consideration of diplomatic strategies to secure a viable American exit would be considered – but never followed through. Indeed, stripping away the generic rhetoric of nation building and increasing governance, the surge was aimed at one main military goal – to stop the momentum of the Taliban by force. By even this metric, by the end of September 2012, the U.S. military’s own figures revealed this goal remained elusive. Citing documents obtained from the NATO command in Afghanistan, *Wired Magazine* noted that attacks on U.S. and NATO troops in 2012 were not noticeably different from 2009 – when Afghanistan was apparently so bad Obama decided to authorize the surge. For instance, in August 2009, Taliban and associated militants attacked U.S. and allied troops with small arms artillery and other means over 2,700 times; in August of 2012, just a month before the end of the surge, the number of attacks stood at just shy of 3,000. The trend, according to the NATO analysis, was consistent – over all the months of 2012 until September, there were more Taliban and insurgent attacks on U.S. troops than in 2009, when violence was supposedly dire.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
In short, the violence was suppressed during the peak of the surge in 2011 according to NATO officials, but when troops began leaving, attacks again rose. Unlike Le Duan’s reluctant return to diplomacy in Paris in order to buy time, it is clear looking at these statistics why the Taliban and their allies saw little potential gain from any diplomatic strategy: the battlefield had changed little by the time the surge ended, and the fundamental balance of power did not reside with the U.S. and its ally Karzai. 15

In one sense, it is hard to disagree with Obama’s comments on comparing the end of the Vietnam War with his escalation in Afghanistan – but for different reasons than he would argue. While both were inherited American wars, with no clear avenue for success or victory, however success depended on the cooperation of allies who were mercurial and often independent actors – the RVN’s Thieu and Afghanistan’s Karzai. In his December 2009 speech, Obama suggested Afghanistan’s war was not a popular insurrection – which it clearly is not, but neither was the Vietnam War in its later years. As made clear by the research of Nguyen and others, by the time Nixon assumed responsibility for America’s war in Vietnam, the guerilla struggle in South Vietnam had largely been eradicated in the wake of the Tet Offensive. Because of the overreach of communist forces in South Vietnam and the North’s uniformed military, the legitimacy and power of the Thieu government was bolstered, even if only slightly. Nixon’s task of handing off the war to his ally, in the form of “Vietnamization,” would

prove a far smoother process than Obama’s fitful attempts to empower an Afghan state run by Karzai.\textsuperscript{16}

The differences, however, in the assumptions, decisions and actions defining Nixon’s Vietnam War in 1972 and Obama’s handling of the Afghan surge are far more profound. These differences give great insight into why “peace” was achieved in Paris some 40 years ago, and why a similar peace remains elusive in Afghanistan today. Nixon’s strategic gambit, by 1972, was premised on the withdrawal of American military forces from Southeast Asia, while leaving an empowered ally behind – and his gambit had largely succeeded by the end of 1972. While the presence of American airpower was a significant factor, the ARVN largely stood and fought back the spring 1972 invasion from the North, with no U.S. ground forces to assist them.\textsuperscript{17} The RVN, unlike Afghanistan by the time of Karzai’s government, had received years of U.S. aid on top of Nixon’s new “Vietnamization” strategy with which to build on a framework left over from the French colonial experience in the country. Though the RVN would be criticized through the years for lack of strong civil institutions, its armed forces were by far the most powerful and influential institutions in the country, and according to now-declassified U.S. assessments, had a larger presence, were better organized and were more widely distributed through South Vietnam. Officers and junior officers had spent time in French-established military academies in the country, and though their

\textsuperscript{16} Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 109.

\textsuperscript{17} Nguyen, \textit{Hanoi’s War}, 260.
performance was uneven at times, when Vietnamization ramped up in the wake of Nixon’s election an institutional framework existed with which to build upon. While the legitimacy of the RVN’s governance would continue to be a problem, the ARVN’s performance – at least on the battlefield by 1972 – was far from incompetent.  

In contrast, one of the assumptions the surge was built upon, that Karzai’s Afghan Army forces would take over fighting from the U.S., proved a disastrous miscalculation. Afghanistan, unlike the RVN, has no modern experience with colonialism – and years of civil war smashed any remaining institutions leftover from the Soviet period. As a result, building competent and professional military forces proved difficult – particularly in a country wracked with regional and ethnic divisions. By the end of Obama’s surge, as Chandrasekaran notes, what was supposed to be a tool to compel Afghans to take on the fight from Americans had the opposite effect. Afghan troops, by and large, hung back and let the Americans do the fighting. Even worse, since the Afghan military was expanded rapidly the ranks were often infiltrated by Taliban, who carried out multiple “friendly fire” attacks on U.S. forces in 2012.

The most profound difference in the approach of Nixon and Obama is that Nixon, even prior to his arrival at the White House, had largely formulated his plan on withdrawing America from Vietnam, and intended to consolidate power within the


White House to carry it out. It is important to note the difference in both age and experience between Nixon and Obama. By the time of his election to the presidency, Nixon was 56 years old, compared to Obama’s 47 on Inauguration Day in January 2009. Nixon, as was noted in Chapter One, had served in the vice presidency previously and drew profound lessons from Dwight Eisenhower’s experience at the end of the Korean War. Nixon had learned firsthand the relationship between military force, the threat of force and negotiating diplomatic ends to a conflict, and applied those lessons to his Vietnam War policies.  

By 1972, Nixon and Kissinger unquestionably ran the foreign policy of the United States as it related to the Vietnam War, and though they would be stymied by military and diplomatic missteps along the way, the duo had a clear plan of action which dated back to Nixon’s comments at his nominating convention in 1968, where Nixon vowed to pursue negotiations to end the Vietnam War. Nixon, as he stated in his nomination speech, believed there was “no acceptable alternative” to peaceful negotiations – and that the credibility of the United States depended on its ability to leave Southeast Asia on good terms. He would follow up his public statements by aggressively withdrawing American combat troops from Vietnam, courting Cold War

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powers and where needed applying American military power from a point of strength – its decisive advantage of using air power to buttress its allies in South Vietnam.

In contrast, Obama – who prior to his election to the presidency had only his experience as a one-term U.S. Senator to draw on – hid his reservations about his eventual war policy decisions, deciding he wanted to spend his political capital on domestic issues instead. When devising his Afghan strategy, Obama was more preoccupied with his belief that he needed to transition from Afghanistan to confront domestic problems, and this would allow more forceful voices to dominate his policy – such as those of Petraeus and McChrystal. In remarks in June 2011, when Obama revealed he would steadily withdraw American forces after his military surge, he revealed his priority as U.S. military forces were still fighting and dying in Central Asia – to turn American attention from the Afghan war, to his domestic agenda. “America,” Obama said in a televised speech from the White House, “it is time to focus on nation building here at home.”

Largely as a result of his priorities at home, Obama failed to articulate his war policy goals clearly – and did not definitively describe how he would use all available tools to achieve this end. Unlike Nixon, who saw diplomacy as an indispensable tool, Obama viewed it as a tool fraught with political peril. While he would have sympathies for utilizing diplomacy, he did not want to give any appearance of weakness that could be exploited by his opponents, and thus gave in to Petraeus and McChrystal’s grand

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designs for counterinsurgency warfare, despite Obama’s reservations – echoed by Biden. As time wore on, even officials in his war cabinet saw that negotiation from a position of strength was critical to ending America’s involvement in the conflict on good terms. “There is a generally accepted view that nearly all conflicts of this kind eventually come to a close with some kind of a political settlement,” said then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates during a conference in Singapore in June 2011, only four months after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had announced Obama now sought to revive negotiations.23 But Obama’s decision to utilize diplomacy came too late in his military surge – as the summer of 2011 the U.S. was at the peak of its military presence in Afghanistan, but no real progress had been made simultaneously in negotiations, nor had Obama attempted to drive a diplomatic wedge between the Taliban and al Qaeda, in stark contrast with Nixon’s 1972 Paris talks and his superpower diplomacy. Gates himself, in summer of 2011, seemed to understand this truth of power politics in his comments about possible negotiations. “The prospect of a political settlement does not become real until the Taliban and the others… begin to conclude that they cannot win militarily,” Gates added. As of the end of the surge in 2012, the evidence suggests the Taliban had decided they had not reached this conclusion.24


24 Ibid.
While the government of Karzai has not collapsed, as aid continues to pour in, Obama’s ability to compel his allies and enemies to the negotiating table has significantly weakened in the aftermath of the surge. U.S. officials now say they have little faith in any direct negotiated settlement between the U.S. and the Taliban – as there is no incentive to settle with an opponent who has already decided it will be withdrawing from a conflict. Gates, in his 2011 comments in Singapore, even suggested he understood this. “Only as long as the military pressure is kept on and there are further gains, will the prospects for a political solution improve,” he said.

With his timeline ending in 2014, Obama removed the pretense of military pressure and undermined any potential success he could have gleaned in negotiation. One could imagine Nixon agreeing with Gates’ sentiment some 40 years ago.  

In both Nixon’s Vietnam War and Obama’s Afghanistan conundrum, we see the assumptions about the parameters, goals and political realities of conflict are as important as the military aspect. Nixon, since he narrowly defined his goals by the end of 1972, was able to achieve them – eventually at a significant cost to Thieu and the Republic of Vietnam. Obama will have an equally greater challenge if not more so with Karzai, as his power is directly tied to U.S. investment in his government – and without the crutch of U.S. troops to lean on, his position grows weaker as the American presence in his country shrinks even more. Karzai himself appeared to understand this, even as the surge raged in Afghanistan. During his address to an Afghan youth conference in June 2011, he criticized his American patrons as being in

25 Ibid.
Afghanistan “for their own purposes, their own goals,” before he would charge the U.S. with negotiating a separate peace with the Taliban without his government. Much like Thieu’s frustration with Nixon’s talks with Hanoi, Karzai feels he must attack his one-time patrons in order to prove his independence – and lay the groundwork for survival after the U.S. leaves in 2014.26

In conclusion, while both Nixon and Obama grappled with enormous challenges in conflicts with no clear avenues to reconciliation or peace, Nixon’s approach bore admittedly limited results while Obama’s did not. Nixon had successfully shaped his strategic goals to be in line with what he believed to be achievable. Theoretician Carl Von Clausewitz, writing in the 19th Century, would judge that Nixon had succeeded in matching his military goals with his political pursuits, and had not turned the Vietnam War into “something that is alien to its nature” by 1972.27 Nixon largely understood the power dynamics of the Vietnam War by 1972, grasped the perspectives and motivations of his enemies in Hanoi, and leveraged their weaknesses through diplomacy to achieve his limited ends – honorable withdrawal, at least by Nixon’s terms. It is the inability to understand that the application of power, particularly military power, in a conflict can achieve limited aims

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something which Obama appears not to have understood during the deliberation and execution of his military surge.

Patience, much like Le Duc Tho believed, would persevere over skill and power. Even Kissinger, years after the Paris Agreement, appears to understand that Nixon succeeded because he understood the limitations on American power in the waning years of the Vietnam War, and that time was not on his side. Nixon came into the White House at a “watershed period” in American history, Kissinger said at a conference celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Paris Accords. America was no longer completely dominant in the world, and new powers were emerging. “In Vietnam, we were learning the limits of our capabilities,” Kissinger said in a 1998 speech. America could no longer define a foreign policy problem, like Vietnam, and say there was a fixed solution. “We henceforth would be in a world in which every solution would be only the admission price to another problem and in which we had to learn to accumulate the benefits and minimize the costs,” he said.28

This was a strategy the United States would embrace in the years after Vietnam as well, he added. “The lessons we have to learn are not that no objective is worth achieving, but that priorities must be established for the objectives that must be achieved and that there are those things only we can do, those things that are desirable to do and those things that are beyond us,” Kissinger concluded. Considering the

experience of Barack Obama’s war in Central Asia, it is well worth considering this advice – albeit belatedly.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
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