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Author(s): Jeffrey Kimball
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# The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding

JEFFREY KIMBALL
*Miami University*

*When President Richard Nixon met with reporters in Guam on July 25, 1969 to discuss the U.S. role in Asia, he did not intend his comments to be understood as constituting a new policy doctrine. After some reporters began referring to key elements of his remarks as the "Nixon Doctrine," Nixon came to appreciate the political value of the phrase and publicly began using it himself, even though his policies toward some of the nations of Asia were inconsistent with the "new" policy, and as he was also about to embark on a course of action in Vietnam that contradicted the "doctrine."*

Conventional wisdom holds that President Richard M. Nixon came into office in January 1969 with a new set of foreign-policy principles that were later dubbed the "Nixon Doctrine." Many who have heard of the doctrine—including most specialists in the field of foreign relations—understand that its key principle was that the United States would call on its allies and friends to supply their own manpower to "defend" themselves against "Communist aggression," while America provided only advice, aid, and arms. Another generally held view is that the doctrine guided Nixon's actions in Indochina and elsewhere and represented a major shift in American foreign policy, overturning the interventionist practices of previous presidents, who had frequently sent American troops abroad to fight for "peace" and "freedom." In the Indochina theater, as the story goes, Nixon implemented the new doctrine through "Vietnamization," by which means he sought to withdraw American armed forces from Indochina while simultaneously defending South Vietnam, winning the war, achieving peace, and preserving American "honor."[1]

1. For a sampling of popular definitions, see Gary B. Nash et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 6th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 2004), 1011; "Nixon Doctrine," in *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved August 5, 2005, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nixon_Doctrine; The Naval War College. Retrieved August 5, 2005, from http://www.nwc.navy.mil/nsc/About%20NSC/sub_nixon.htm.

*Jeffrey Kimball is a professor at Miami University. His books include* To Reason Why: The Debate About the Causes of American Involvement in the Vietnam War *(1990)*, Nixon's Vietnam War *(1998)*, *and* The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy *(2004)*.

These customary understandings of the Nixon Doctrine are erroneous in whole or substantial part. The Nixon Doctrine did not constitute a foreign-policy doctrine in the sense of having been a grand strategy or a master set of principles and guidelines controlling policy decisions. Whether it truly was a doctrine or not, however, Nixon did not practice its principles consistently or even intend to do so when he first announced them. The so-called doctrine, moreover, did not represent a major shift in U.S. foreign policy: previous administrations had applied or attempted to apply the Nixon Doctrine's core principles in selected areas of the world. In Indochina, Vietnamization was not the main component of Nixon's strategy, and he secretly valued other, more militant approaches. Vietnamization was not even a Nixon administration invention. It diffusely originated with the antiwar movement, congressional doves, and agency staffers during the period of President Lyndon B. Johnson's direction of the war, and it was a topic candidates and parties discussed during the 1968 election campaign. In addition, Nixon did not begin to implement Vietnamization in earnest until many months into his presidency, and he did so only after other components of his strategy failed to produce victory and as members of his own administration and the public demanded that he withdraw American troops more rapidly. At the very moment Nixon announced the "doctrine," the measures for which it stood were secondary to others he had in mind for dealing with the Vietnam War, Asia, and the world.

## What Nixon Said in Guam

Nixon delivered his first public comments about what would later become known as the Nixon Doctrine in Guam on the evening of July 25, 1969. The island was at the end of the second leg of a thirteen-day around-the-world political and diplomatic voyage, on which Nixon had embarked from Washington, DC on July 23. The president and his entourage had landed at Johnson Island that same day and—after crossing the international dateline aboard the *U.S.S. Arlington*—had rendezvoused by helicopter with the aircraft carrier *Hornet* on July 25. From its bridge Nixon had watched the splashdown and recovery of the Apollo XI space capsule, which was returning to Earth from its historic mission to the moon. After a greeting ceremony for the triumphant astronauts, an exuberant Nixon had flown to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam. On July 26, the morning after his press conference, he continued on his journey for brief visits with the heads of state of the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Vietnam, India, Pakistan, and Romania. On August 3 he began his return to the United States via England, while Henry A. Kissinger, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, flew to Paris to meet with Xuan Thuy on August 4—the first of many, though intermittent, secret meetings Kissinger was to have with North Vietnamese negotiators.[2]

Aside from the public relations boost he hoped to receive, the president intended his whirlwind, globe-girdling trip to serve several purposes, most of which were related

2. Entries for July 23-August 4, 1969, Journals and Diaries of Harry Robbins Haldeman (JDHRH), Nixon Presidential Materials Project (NPMP); Appointments Log, in *The Haldeman Diaries: Inside the Nixon White House, the Complete Multimedia Edition* (Santa Monica, CA: Sony Electronic Publishing Company, 1994).

to his evolving strategy for the Vietnam War. Nixon intimated in his 1978 historical memoir, *RN*, for example, that the trip's main purpose was to provide "the perfect camouflage" for Kissinger's clandestine meeting with the North Vietnamese in early August.[3] On July 30, meanwhile, following an unannounced flight from Bangkok to Saigon, Nixon met with President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam to give him the unwelcome news that additional American troop withdrawals would take place in phases according to an American plan whose timetable was supposed to be contingent on the circumstances of the war, but which would prove to be contingent as well on political circumstances in the United States. Nixon also assured Thieu that he was taking diplomatic and military steps to back up the process of Vietnamization and conclude the war favorably.[4]

Nixon had other purposes for the trip in mind, especially with his visits to Pakistan and Romania. These were indirectly related to the Vietnam War and directly related to his interest in exploring the possibility of rapprochement with China and linkage diplomacy toward the Soviet Union and its East bloc allies. In Lahore he was hoping the Pakistanis would agree to serve as intermediaries with the Chinese, and with his visit to Bucharest he hoped to needle the Soviets while using the Romanians to deliver a warning to North Vietnam.[5]

Nixon opened the press conference in Guam telling reporters that before he took their questions he wanted to give them his "perspective" on the U.S. "role in Asia and in the Pacific," because Asian leaders were wondering whether Americans' "frustration over the war in Vietnam" would cause the United States to "withdraw from the Pacific and play a minor role" in the future. "This is a decision that will have to be made, of course, as the war comes to an end," but he pointed out that in any case the administration needs to take the "long-range view" and make plans ahead of time. Rejecting the option of withdrawing from the Pacific as had the British, French, and Dutch, Nixon argued that he "was convinced that the way to avoid becoming involved in another war in Asia is for the United States to continue to play a significant role." Like it or not, he pointed out, the United States sits astride the Pacific Ocean and has historically been a Pacific power. "As we look at Asia today," Nixon continued, "the peace of the world" is threatened by China, North Korea, and North Vietnam. Considering these "factors," he said, we must therefore realize that "down the long road"—four to twenty years from now—"potentially the greatest threat to that peace will be in the Pacific." At the same time, he observed, "We should not let that obscure the great promise that is here" for economic development. Look, he said, at the progress already made in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. Therefore, he concluded, "We need policies that will see that we play a part and a part that is appropriate to the conditions

3. Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 394.

4. Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon and Thieu, July 30, 1969, folder: MemCons—The President and President Thieu, July 30, 1969, box 1023, Presidential/HAK MemCons, National Security Council Files (NSCF), NPMP.

5. F. S. Aijazuddin, *From a Head, through a Head, to a Head: The Secret Channel Between the U.S. and China through Pakistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3; Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon and Ceauşescu, August 3, 1969, folder: MemCons—The President and President Ceauşescu, August 2, 1969, box 1023, Presidential/HAK MemCons, NSCF, NPMP.

that we will find." Among those conditions were "national pride" and "regional pride." Asians "do not want to be dictated to from the outside."

Before making brief remarks about his trip to Romania, Nixon concluded his prepared statement with a summation of the kind of role he thought the United States should play:

> The political and economic plans that they [the non-Communist Asian states of the Pacific Rim] are gradually developing are very hopeful. We will give assistance to those plans. We, of course, will keep the treaty commitments that we have. But as far as our role is concerned, we must avoid that kind of policy that will make countries in Asia so dependent upon us that we are dragged into conflicts such as the one that we have in Vietnam. This is going to be a difficult line to follow. It is one, however, that I think, with proper planning, we can develop.[6]

Nixon had said very little in his prepared remarks that was not already the conventional thinking of much of the foreign-policy establishment, the press, and the informed, attentive public.[7] He had declared that the United States was a major Pacific power, which was having difficulties with China, North Korea, and Vietnam. There was a danger of conflict beyond the Vietnam War because of this. America, however, must not withdraw from Asia. It has an economic interest in trading and investing in capitalist-leaning Asian nations and in maintaining that kind of peace the U.S. government considers necessary for economic development and the avoidance of future wars. The United States will play a significant role in Asia-Pacific affairs and stand by its military commitments. Although America will not retreat from Asia, it must be sensitive to nationalist sentiment. Americans also want to avoid turning their commitments into another frustrating Vietnam quagmire. Hence, the administration is in the process of reevaluating its policies to see whether and how all this can be accomplished. Nixon's message was reminiscent of much of what he had already written in an article for the October 1967 issue of *Foreign Affairs* magazine entitled "Asia After Vietnam," but like that piece, it was lacking in specificity about how to solve the paradox of commitment without war.

Then came reporters' questions. The first had to do with an issue that would be raised several times during the question-and-answer period: how would the president assure an Asian leader with close military ties to the United States that Americans would "remain to play a significant role . . . in security arrangements in Asia?" This brought a response from Nixon that indicated that most of the "security" treaties and agreements were about maintaining the "internal security" of status quo governments from the Philippines to South Korea to Indonesia to Thailand against the "internal threats" from dissidents and rebels within. At the end of a rambling response, Nixon summarized the point he wanted to make:

6. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Richard Nixon: 1969* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), 544-48.

7. See, e.g., "Nixon's Asian Doctrine," *New York Times*, August 3, 1969.

> When we talk about collective security for Asia, . . . insofar as it deals with internal threats to any one of the countries, or insofar as it deals with a threat other than that posed by a nuclear power, I believe that this is an objective which free Asian nations, independent Asian nations, can seek and which the United States should support.

The next question explored the issue of internal threats and their relationship to the Vietnam War experience, which Nixon had said he did not want to repeat: "Mr. President, when you speak of internal threats, do you include threats internally assisted by a country from the outside, such as we have in Vietnam?" Nixon evaded the question, saying little else but "generally speaking, that is the kind of internal threat that we do have in the Asian countries."

After questions on other topics, a reporter took up the original thread about avoiding another Vietnam War. He asked the president to explain what his policy would be if "a Vietnam-type situation does occur" before Asian nations "could collectively take care of their regional security problems" five or ten years down the road. Nixon's answer again indicated that his thinking on the subject had not yet been put into final policy form, and that in any case he did not intend his incipient policy to become a rigid doctrine: "I would simply say we are going to handle each country on a case-by-case basis." Nixon added that he was "attempting to avoid that creeping involvement which eventually simply submerges you—incidentally, I don't say that critically of how we got into Vietnam, but I do know that we can learn from past experience, and we must avoid that kind of involvement in the future."[8]

Had Nixon concluded the conference at this point, reporters and pundits might have been disinclined to view his expressed intention of avoiding creeping troop involvement in future crises as a demarche in policy making. But the president continued with additional extemporaneous remarks that may have made his incipient policy sound more like a doctrine:

> I recall in 1964 some advice that I got from Ayub Khan . . . of Pakistan. . . . He said: "The role of the United States in . . . any of those countries which have internal subversion is to help them fight the war but not fight the war for them." Now, that, of course, is a good general principle, one which we would hope would be our policy generally throughout the world.

What had begun as an informal and ambiguous explanation to reporters about his perspective on the future role of the United States in Asia remained informal and ambiguous. If one took the adjective "general" to mean "applicable to the whole," however, Nixon's nascent policy now must have seemed to some intended for all Third World allies and clients around the world. He probably intended the other sense of the word: "applicable in most instances but not all."

As the press conference drew to a close, reporters asked several more questions on related themes, with Nixon more or less repeating what he had previously said: "There

8. *Public Papers of the Presidents, Nixon: 1969*, 548-52.

is a future for American counterinsurgency . . . advice or assistance," but the United States will draw the line

> in becoming involved heavily with our own personnel. . . . I want to be sure that our policies in the future, all over the world, in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the rest, reduce American involvement. One of assistance, yes, assistance in helping them solve their own problems, but not going in and just doing the job ourselves.

When one reporter asked whether Nixon's "message" was "no more Vietnams," the president repeated his desire "to avoid another war like Vietnam any place in the world. . . . I realize it is very easy to say that. . . . But what we can do is to learn from the mistakes of the past."[9]

Almost immediately following the news conference, the press began referring to Nixon's comments as the "Guam Doctrine," a term that remained in use in some newspapers at least as late as September 1970. Yet almost as quickly, editorialists and reporters had also begun using "Nixon Doctrine," placing Nixon in the pantheon of other presidents who had announced doctrines. Incongruously, the press continued using the appellation even when they noted contradictions between Nixon's rhetoric and his actions.[10] This practice, which historians and political scientists would soon follow, may simply have been the result of groupthink and stylistic convenience. Even if the Nixon Doctrine was not a true doctrine, everyone seemed to be calling his "new" Asian policy a doctrine. Moreover, it was easier to write "Nixon Doctrine" than to try to describe, explain, or encapsulate the ambiguous statements Nixon had uttered in Guam or to discover and explain what lay beneath the rhetoric. As with other presidential doctrines, repetition caused this abstraction to acquire a life of its own, detached from material existence.

Besides, Nixon had told reporters at the outset that his remarks were "for attribution but not direct quotation, and for background." The White House did not release the transcript of Nixon's Guam press conference until 1971, the date of the publication of the first volume of his public papers, where it was given the title of "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen." Nixon had prepared his opening statement without Kissinger's knowledge or the assistance of Kissinger's staff—an unusual step, but one indicating that his intention had not been to make a serious, formal announcement of a new "doctrine." Years later, Kissinger commented that he did

> not think that Nixon intended a major policy pronouncement in Guam: his original purpose had been to make some news because of the empty period produced by the crossing of the international dateline. That a formal pronouncement was not at first on Nixon's mind is indicated by the fact that his remarks were made on background.[11]

9. Ibid., 553-54.

10. See, e.g., Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 224; *New York Times*, July 31 and August 3, 1969, June 29 and July 2, 1970; *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 17, 1970.

11. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 224.

Taken together, these conditions may have contributed to Nixon's impromptu garrulousness and reporters' later misunderstanding or mischaracterization of his remarks.

Another reason for misunderstanding, most probably, was that Nixon's words were intentionally imprecise. He wanted not to make policy but to project an image of a foreign-policy leader who was experienced, comprehensive in his thinking, and far-sighted. Above all, he was walking a fine line—needing to assure voters and European allies that he intended to withdraw from Vietnam and avoid future "Vietnams" while also assuring Asian and other allies and clients in the capitalist-leaning developing world that he was not abandoning U.S. commitments. In July 1969 Nixon was still stuck in Vietnam, trying to uphold his and previous administrations' commitments to the Saigon government in the name of preserving his and the U.S. government's "honor" and "credibility."[12] To this end—to the end of avoiding defeat or the appearance of it—he was secretly considering military escalation in Vietnam with operation Duck Hook as he was simultaneously embarking on Vietnamization.

## The Historical Context

The Nixon Doctrine can best be understood in the context of the history of the Vietnam War, the evolution of Nixon's Vietnam strategy, and the origins of Vietnamization. On March 13, over four months before the Guam news conference, Nixon's secretary of defense, Melvin R. Laird, had recommended the drafting of a contingency plan for a phased withdrawal of 70,000 U.S. armed forces personnel by the end of 1969, with more to follow in the months ahead. Nixon, however, did not approve the preparation of such a plan until April 10, by which time Laird had additionally recommended that the term "Vietnamization" be used to describe withdrawals rather than the negative-sounding "De-Americanization." Thus, Vietnamization came to stand for two different but related processes: American withdrawals and—in order to counterbalance these withdrawals—the accelerated training, equipping, and enlarging of the South Vietnamese army. On June 8 Nixon had met with Thieu on Midway Island to inform him that the United States would begin to withdraw 25,000 troops on July 1, with a completion date of August 31.

By the time Nixon left Washington, DC on July 23 for Guam and places beyond, a long-running debate within the administration about the speed of withdrawals had intensified. Secretary of Defense Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers wanted to accelerate withdrawals; Kissinger did not. Although Kissinger knew that Vietnamization was an essential component of a White House strategy he had been instrumental in fashioning, he was convinced that other components of the strategy

12. See, e.g., Memorandum of Conversation, July 30, 1969, subject: President Nixon's Comments to Chiefs of Mission, Bangkok, attachment to Memorandum, Marshall Green to Rogers, August 12, 1969, POL 7 U.S./Nixon, Central Files, General Records of the Department of State (GRDOS), RG59, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

were more likely to coerce the other side into compromising on the terms Nixon and he wanted.[13]

These other components of Nixon and Kissinger's developing plan for prosecuting the Vietnam War included détente and triangular diplomacy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union; negotiations with the Vietnamese Communists; expanded ground, air, and counterinsurgency operations; and the application of what Nixon thought of as the "madman theory," or "the principle of the threat of excessive force." The emphasis Nixon and Kissinger placed on one or another component of the strategy was always in flux, however, because they had to take into consideration not only the views of Laird, Rogers, and Kissinger's staff within the administration but also the circumstances of the war in Indochina, the state of international relations, and political and economic factors on the home front, namely, public opinion, the antiwar movement, Congress, and the national budget.

In addition, Nixon and Kissinger had their own unique perspectives on each part of the strategy. Nixon emphasized the value of threat and force over negotiations, and Kissinger, although championing the negotiations he conducted on Nixon's behalf, was a reliable backer of Nixon's forceful measures and madman theory threats. To Hanoi, Nixon and Kissinger extended positive and negative incentives. One positive incentive was to offer to begin secret negotiations. At the same time, however, they deployed negative incentives: dramatically stepped-up bombing in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam; expanded military and pacification operations throughout Indochina; and threats to destroy North Vietnam unless the latter cooperated in signing a cease-fire agreement acceptable to the Nixon administration. To Nixon and Kissinger and their staffs, even the policy of Vietnamization had its positive and negative incentives. Among these, South Vietnam would be encouraged to believe that it would result in the strengthening of its army, while the prospect of a strengthened South Vietnamese army would presumably pressure North Vietnam into compromising at the negotiating table. Although offering the carrot of détente to Moscow, Nixon and Kissinger brandished military and diplomatic sticks as well. They believed, for example, that the threat of escalation in Vietnam would worry the Soviets, then the main, if reluctant, supplier of matériel to Hanoi. Concurrently, they linked the prospect of U.S. agreements on trade and arms control with the Soviet Union to Soviet cooperation regarding Vietnam. As the year 1969 progressed, Nixon and Kissinger put increasing emphasis on playing the "China card" against the Soviets for the same purpose, namely, to try to lever Moscow's assistance in persuading Hanoi to compromise on the terms of a cease-fire settlement.[14]

13. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 137-39; Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 87-89; Thomas C. Thayer, *War without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), Table 4.6.

14. For more on U.S. and Vietnamese strategy and policy, as well as the negotiations in Paris, and for source citations, see Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* and *The Vietnam War Files*, passim. On incentives: Tony Lake, telephone interview by the author, October 15, 2001. Among many documents on the purposes of Vietnamization, this one is particularly interesting: Vietnam Policy Alternatives, July 1969, encl. in Memorandum, Halperin and Lord to Kissinger, August 5, 1969, folder: Misc. Materials—Selected Lord Memos, Director's Files (Winston Lord), 1969-1977, Policy Planning Council (S/PC), Policy Planning Staff (S/P), GRDOS, RG59, NARA. On the China card, see, e.g., William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 104.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, which assumes that Nixon and Kissinger had come to power in 1969 wanting simply to extricate the United States from South Vietnam "with honor," their goal was to win the war, that is, to win a negotiated settlement that would keep Thieu in power in Saigon. This is what honor meant to them. Hence, their fundamental policy goal in Vietnam was little different than that of previous American administrations: sustaining U.S. global hegemony and credibility. They believed, however, they possessed better skills and a better strategy than their predecessors to achieve it. During this first year of Nixon's presidency, they expected that the measures they had adopted would force the other side to accept their terms. Vietnamization—the Nixon Doctrine for Vietnam—would primarily serve the political purpose of buying time on the home front for the other elements of their strategy to take effect.

Consequently, Nixon sided with Kissinger in his debate with Laird and Rogers on the question of the pace of American troop withdrawals. The president, however, also felt the need to appease his secretary of defense and secretary of state and also meet the expectations of Congress and the public, as he had seemed to promise during the presidential campaign of 1968 that he would withdraw American forces. At a high-level strategy meeting on July 7, Nixon chose a middle course, indicating support for continued troop withdrawals but postponing a decision on the size of the next increment. (In September he would approve the pullout of another 40,000 by December 15, on which date he also approved the withdrawal of another 50,000 by April 1970.)[15]

In early July 1969, both Nixon and Kissinger felt they were at a strategic crossroads. Their plan for the Vietnam War did not seem to be working. Despite ground offensives, expanded bombing, and linkage diplomacy, neither the North Vietnamese nor the Soviets were cooperating. At home Nixon continued to enjoy a honeymoon from massive antiwar demonstrations, but he nevertheless faced criticism from congressional doves, former Johnson administration officials, antiwar activists, and even the mainstream press for continuing to launch ground offensives in South Vietnam, for the slow rate of troop withdrawals, for his support of Thieu, and for his apparent lack of leadership. Their perception, based on what knowledge they had about what was happening in Vietnam and on what the administration was saying, was that Nixon was "maintaining maximum military pressure on the enemy in Vietnam."[16]

Nixon also felt badgered from an unexpected quarter for the opposite reasons. Right-wing hawks were unhappy about his failure to cut domestic government spending and for his supposed "softening in Vietnam," a reference to his emerging policy of Vietnamization and his talk of negotiating with the Communist enemy.[17]

In July, before he left on his trip to Asia and Romania, Nixon was also concerned about what he perceived to be the unease of some Asian allies and clients of the United

15. Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, July 7, 1969, subject: Sequoia NSC Meeting on Vietnam, folder: Vietnam Papers, box 338, Director's Files (Winston Lord), 1969-1977, S/PC, S/P, GRDOS, RG59, NARA.

16. On perceptions of maximum pressure, see reporter's question in *Public Papers of the Presidents, Richard Nixon: 1969*, 556; Tom Wicker, "Mr. Nixon Looks at Asia," *New York Times*, July 6, 1969.

17. Entry for July 7, 1969, JDHRH, NPMP.

States about the implications of Vietnamization, that is, the de-Americanizing aspect of it. The rightist and military dictatorships of the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand had security agreements with the United States, and American forces were stationed on their soil. Did Vietnamization signal U.S. disengagement not only from South Vietnam but from Asia as well? Thus, another reason for Nixon's trip was to reassure them about the steadfastness of American commitments.

It was the increasingly apparent impasse of the Vietnam War, however, that was uppermost on his mind. In a 1971 conversation with Kissinger, Nixon recalled what he was thinking and saying privately in early July 1969 about how to break the deadlock: "I said, all right, we gotta decide now: either stand up or flush it." By this he meant that he had perceived his choices to be either those of militarily escalating to force a favorable negotiated agreement or of "escalating for the purpose of accelerating the withdrawal and to protect the Americans when you're getting out." In either case, "We'll bomb the bastards."[18] With these options in mind, he decided to continue with troop withdrawals but also to begin considering military escalation, which he and his planners envisioned as a sudden, massive bombing and mining operation to begin around November 1 against North Vietnam in and around Hanoi and Haiphong that might last up to six months. It was code named Duck Hook.

In the meantime, he would launch the first phase of the escalation option: a campaign of threat making directed against North Vietnam in the form of ultimatums kept secret from the American and world public but delivered directly to Hanoi and indirectly via third parties in hopes of coercing Hanoi into cooperation before Duck Hook was to begin. One of these third parties was the Communist dictator of Romania, President Nicolae Ceauséscu. On August 3, expecting that Ceauséscu would forward his message to Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi, Nixon told him that he would resume the bombing of North Vietnam unless there was "progress" in the negotiations. He also invoked his linkage ploy, telling Ceauséscu: "There is nothing more important to me than to end this war on a fair basis. It will make possible the many Romanian-U.S. [trade] actions we talked about, could make possible U.S.-Chinese relations, and would help relations with the Soviet Union."[19]

When Nixon held his news conference in Guam on July 25, 1969, he believed it necessary to buy more time for his strategy to unfold, because he was secretly and seriously considering the possibility of setting out on a course of dramatic escalation aimed at coercing the other side to give in, a course that would turn "Johnson's War" into "Nixon's War," testing the limits of his support at home. Nixon realized he was walking a political tightrope. He knew he needed to reassure allies and clients, including Thieu, of his administration's resolve while appearing to withdraw from Vietnam. On the other hand, he also needed to reassure the majority of Americans, as well as other allies, especially in Japan and Europe, that not only was he withdrawing from Vietnam but also

18. Oval Office Conversation no. 527-16, Nixon, Haldeman, Kissinger, and Ehrlichman, 9:14 a.m.-10:12 a.m., June 23, 1971, White House Tapes, NPMP (transcribed by the author).

19. Memorandum of Conversation, Nixon and Ceauséscu, August 3, 1969, folder: MemCons—The President and President Ceauséscu, August 2, 1969, box 1023, Presidential/HAK MemCons, NSCF, NPMP.

that he had learned a lesson, namely, that U.S. troops should not again become bogged down so massively in an Asian quagmire, especially one that was not vital to its interests.

## Misunderstandings and Contradictions

Kissinger and H. R. Haldeman—Nixon's chief of staff and confidant—had been caught off guard by Nixon's performance at the Guam press conference. Although surprised, Haldeman was pleased because Nixon's words made news for home front consumption, which was generally favorable. Although Kissinger was familiar with the ideas Nixon had expressed (ideas that he and Nixon had discussed on and off since January), he was initially unhappy. His main concern was that Nixon had made what seemed to some a major policy statement that had not been properly vetted and was sufficiently ambiguous as to create problems for the administration with allies and clients, problems that Kissinger and his staff would have to repair. In addition, and despite assurances regarding upholding commitments, Nixon's remarks about American withdrawals and Asian self-reliance might serve to undercut the threat-making strategy they were simultaneously launching against North Vietnam.[20]

The allied and client governments of the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan were indeed perplexed. At his stops in Manila, Jakarta, Bangkok, and Saigon, Nixon was at pains to repeat assurances that the United States would abide by its security commitments, provide assistance against internal threats, and help defend against external ones with new and old strategies.[21]

Nixon's public assurances of support to allies and clients at the stops he made after Guam were also addressed to hawks at home. Patrick Buchanan, one of Nixon's right-wing aides, who among other things monitored the press, reported "widespread confusion" on the meaning of the Nixon Doctrine. Buchanan was probably referring to the confusion of hawks like himself. This concerned Nixon, who gave Kissinger the task of evaluating Buchanan's assessment by sampling popular reaction at home. In an August 29 memorandum to the president, Kissinger reported that his staff had found Buchanan's comments to "clearly overstate the case. . . . The import of your policy approach was very well understood indeed" in the mainstream press. Citing examples, Kissinger informed Nixon that journalists

> Roscoe and Geoffrey Drummond called it "a major turning point in American foreign policy. . . . The president . . . is not only talking about a radically changed Asian policy but he is carrying it forward with speed and direction. . . ." Don Oberdorfer . . . wrote that "Mr. Nixon showed on his recent trip that he has learned many things. . . . The most pertinent seemed to be that security begins at home, and that the first positive steps toward a new Asian era must come from Asia itself."

20. Entry for July 25, 1969, JDHRH; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 223.

21. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Nixon, 1969*, 557-604; *New York Times*, June 29, 1970; Entries for August 2-3, 1969, JDHRH.

Concluding his memo, Kissinger added that "Stanley Karnow said much the same thing, and both he and Oberdorfer related the 'Nixon Doctrine' to your 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article."[22]

In the same memorandum, Kissinger succinctly restated or summarized the doctrine in his own words:

> The United States will live up to its commitments to defend countries against external aggression from major military powers but will not send U.S. troops to fight internal subversion in these countries and will limit its role to providing appropriate military and economic assistance to help the threatened countries help themselves.

This wording was in some respects clearer than Nixon's, but it, too, marked little or no change in the long-standing American policy, and, moreover, it did not address the problem of Vietnam-type creeping involvement. Even if the United States under the Nixon Doctrine limited its role to assisting countries fight internal "subversion," it could still be drawn into large troop, air, or naval escalations if the crusade against socialism and communism were deemed essential to American global interests, or if policy makers linked internal threats to the machinations of rival powers. In the end, it would come down to policy makers' prudence, wisdom, judgment, courage in the face of political and bureaucratic pressure, and case-by-case analysis, as opposed to ideological conformity—which meant it could happen again, even if not in exactly the same way.

Less than a month after Kissinger's memo, and as Nixon began to appreciate the PR value of the Nixon Doctrine, he instructed Kissinger to help him "set some foreign policy goals—some areas where we hope to achieve progress"—besides Vietnam. Nixon mentioned Latin America, Nigeria, foreign aid, and "implementation of the Nixon Asian doctrine," because it was not then being implemented. "Why don't you have one of the bright people in your staff play with this and come up with some goals that we should set out to achieve," Nixon suggested.[23] Interestingly, he had used the term "Nixon Asian doctrine," even though in Guam and on later occasions, he, as well as his aides, would sometimes say or imply that the doctrine applied to all the world. In any event, the bright staffer Kissinger chose for the task was Winston Lord, his Asia specialist.

Lord submitted his report on January 23, 1970. In it he made the point that the nascent Nixon Doctrine was neither a "grand strategy" nor a "master plan." The "proposed policy" was "not all that different from the rhetoric of past policy," although it did have "operational value" insofar as it was "putting flesh" on actions already being taken but which had not been "consciously constructed" as part of a "consistent pattern." He also pointed out that if the Nixon Doctrine were to become a governing doctrine, there were several unresolved issues to settle on a case-by-case, country-by-country basis. Kissinger's comment on the cover page of Lord's memo was: "Winston, I've read

22. Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, August 29, 1969, subject: Press Reaction to "Nixon Doctrine," folder: Haldeman File 1969 San Clemente [Part I], box 52, White House Special Files/Staff Member and Office Files (WHSF/SMOF): Haldeman, NPMP.

23. Memorandum, Nixon to Kissinger, September 22, 1969, box 228, Presidential Memos, *WHSF/SMOF: Haldeman*, NPMP.

belatedly—1st class. How do you suggest we get policy resolutions of unresolved issues?"[24]

Before Lord had submitted his report in late January 1970, Nixon had begun to incorporate the phrase "Nixon Doctrine" into his public pronouncements. The first and most important occasion was his televised address to the nation on November 3, 1969, in which he characterized it as "a new direction in American foreign policy," described Vietnamization as its Vietnam version, and reiterated the key principles he had mentioned in Guam.[25]

The November 3 speech marked a turning point in his prosecution of the war. Instead of announcing and defending the launching of the now-aborted Duck Hook operation in this speech, as originally intended in the early drafting process,[26] Nixon criticized his antiwar opponents and issued a summons to the "Silent Majority" to rally behind his administration in support of the continuing struggle for the long haul. Nixon knew "this would make it his war" in the minds of the American public, and he prepared new plans to put pressure on the enemy while withdrawing additional American troops. Vietnamization now took on added significance. Privately, however, Nixon still valued big military operations more than the Nixon Doctrine, as evidenced by a comment he made to Kissinger in the Oval Office on April 27, 1970, shortly before his invasion of Cambodia: "Looking back on the past year we have been praised for all the wrong things: Okinawa, SALT, germs, Nixon Doctrine. Now finally [we are] doing the right thing."[27] While slowly pulling out American troops, he would escalate again and again with the invasions of Cambodia (1970) and Laos (1971) and two big bombing and mining operations against North Vietnam (1972).

For the president, the Nixon Doctrine became a double-edged political sword. On the positive side, the press and public perceived the war as winding down, even if too slowly, and many took Nixon at his word that he would not involve the United States in future Vietnams. In addition, once the phrase Nixon Doctrine was in vogue, it gave "his policy actions a colorful and systematic image," as William Bundy observed.[28] It,

24. Memorandum, Lord to Kissinger, January 23, 1970, subject: Issues Raised by the Nixon Doctrine for Asia, folder 2: Misc. Materials—Selected Lord Memos, box 335, Subject-Numeric Files, 1970-1973, Department of State Central Files, GRDOS, RG59, NARA. The report may have been drafted by another Asia specialist, Lindsey Grant, or Grant may have assisted Lord in the drafting.

25. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Nixon, 1969*, 901-9. Al Haig, Kissinger's aide, however, wrote him that the president's reference to the Nixon Doctrine in the speech was "a little bit deceptive"; Memo, Haig to Kissinger, October 31, 1969, subj: The President's Speech, folder 1, box 78, National Security Council Files: Vietnam Subject Files, NPMP. On February 18, 1970, in his report to Congress on foreign policy, Nixon included a section on "'Peace through Partnership—The Nixon Doctrine.' . . . Its central thesis is that the United States will participate in the defense and development of allies and friends, but that America cannot—and will not—conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world. We will help where it makes a real difference and is considered in our interest." "Report by President Nixon to the Congress," February 18, 1970, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Nixon, 1970*, 116-90.

26. For the reasons Nixon cancelled Duck Hook and the secret nuclear alert he substituted for it, see William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, "Nixon's Secret Nuclear Alert: Vietnam War Diplomacy and the Joint Chiefs of Staff Readiness Test, October 1969," *Cold War History* 3 (January 2003): 113-56; Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 21-24, 110-20.

27. Entries for October 8 and 11, 1969 and April 27, 1970, JDHRH, NPMP. "Okinawa" was a reference to the Okinawa reversion agreement, SALT to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, and "germs" to the chemical weapons negotiations.

28. Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, 518.

along with other catchy terms—Vietnamization, détente, triangular diplomacy, opening to China, structure of peace—boosted his and Kissinger's foreign-policy stature through the remainder of his presidency and even after Watergate revelations forced his resignation.

On the negative side of the double-edged sword, critics began using the Nixon Doctrine against him, particularly when he violated it with the bombing and invasion of Cambodia, the bombing of Laos, and the sending of a carrier task force into the Indian Ocean during the India-Pakistan conflict in 1971. In Iran, where Nixon did appear to follow the principles of the Nixon Doctrine, the United States' stepped-up support for the shah against internal and external "threats" ultimately led to a disaster for American foreign policy by the time of Jimmy Carter's administration. In Chile, where it might be said the policy was also followed, the administration proactively encouraged right-wing and military elements to plot against the Allende government and to engage in kidnapping, which led to assassinations, a coup, and human rights violations.

Although originally displeased with Nixon's impromptu announcements in Guam, Kissinger eventually jumped onto the bandwagon, writing reports about the Nixon Doctrine that Nixon wanted to hear about its originality and value. In his memoirs, however, Kissinger would diminish its significance yet simultaneously claim partial credit for the policy's origins. Historians later chose sides, following Kissinger's lead regarding origins or pointing out, as journalists had in 1969, that the Nixon Doctrine grew out of Nixon's 1967 *Foreign Policy* article (notwithstanding ambiguities and contradictions in the article).[29]

Despite these claims, the search for truth about the origins of the Nixon Doctrine has to begin with an examination of the growing consensus in the country and among foreign-policy specialists by 1967 at least that not only was it necessary for the United States to disengage from Vietnam[30] but also that economic and manpower pressures required the United States to reduce the number of American troops stationed abroad.[31] There were widespread concerns about the growing balance of payments deficit and the question of whether the United States should continue to play the role of world policeman.

There is little doubt that President Nixon wanted "no more Vietnams." In the end, however, his doctrine boiled down to learning from the mistakes of the past in order to avoid creeping troop involvement. But what had he learned from the Vietnam experience? Nixon's disclaimer during the question-and-answer period at the Guam press conference about speaking "critically of how we got into Vietnam" was an indirect reference to his public and private criticisms over the years of John F. Kennedy's and Lyndon B.

29. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 222-24. In contrast to other mainstream reporters, Tom Wicker had written a piece published on July 6, 1969 in the *New York Times* in which he correctly noted that Nixon's *Foreign Policy* article was ambiguous and could be interpreted as a call for a regional Asian military and diplomatic alliance led by the United States against China. Interestingly, he also used the term "Nixon's *Doctrine*" to refer to this new policy, whose import was quite different from what Nixon said in Guam after Wicker had published his article.

30. For example, see Vietnam Policy Alternatives, [ca. December 27, 1968], folder10: Vietnam—RAND, box 3, HAK Administrative and Staff Files—Transition, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, NPMP.

31. See polls in John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), chap. 4.

Johnson's roles in escalating the U.S. troop commitment to South Vietnam. It revealed much about his thinking. Nixon's nascent policy for Asia resembled the Vietnam policy of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, under whom Nixon had served as vice president. Wanting to "defend" South Vietnam from "internal threats" that were more or less supported by outside powers, but also wanting to avoid sending large numbers of American troops to South Vietnam, Eisenhower had provided significant amounts of military, economic, advisory, and rhetorical assistance to President Ngo Dinh Diem between 1955 and 1961 for counterinsurgency and nation-building programs—consistent with his New Look Policy. It was this significant commitment of Eisenhower's, as much as Kennedy's and Johnson's additional escalations, however, that had produced creeping involvement, with whose consequences President Nixon now had to deal. Each president, in fact, had pledged U.S. support to South Vietnamese governments ostensibly in order to enable them to fight their own battles against internal threats, but U.S. administrations had considered the survival of these governments essential to America's global interests and reputation, hence, creeping involvement.

In any event, the lesson Nixon had apparently learned from the Vietnam experience—as evidenced by his past and future statements about the history of the war—was that Eisenhower administration policy vis-à-vis Vietnam had been working well until the Kennedy administration collaborated in Diem's assassination. He believed that it was the assassination that had caused internal security to significantly deteriorate and destabilize South Vietnam. Thus, Kennedy and Johnson had tried to retrieve the situation by committing American troops and air power, but, in Nixon's judgment, all too gradually. Nixon elaborated on this version of history in his 1985 book, *No More Vietnams*, in which he criticized Kennedy's and Johnson's "restraint" in using military force against North Vietnam; this, according to Nixon, limited America's options in Vietnam and produced a quagmire.[32]

If subsequent administrations from Gerald R. Ford's to William J. Clinton's exhibited reluctance to commit American troops in large numbers to Third or Second World hot spots they deemed important to U.S. interests, it was because they had learned the same lesson Nixon had claimed he had learned, namely, try to avoid quagmires such as Vietnam. Therefore, before sending in troops, use all other means necessary; but if these fail and America's interests and credibility are on the line, go in with overwhelming force—assuming that step is politically feasible at home. Thus, the "Vietnam Analogy," or as President Ronald Reagan called it, the "Vietnam Syndrome," was more important in the long run than the Nixon Doctrine, itself the product of the Vietnam Analogy. Whether or not new quagmires could develop out of this lesson learned would turn, however, on the judgment, wisdom, and prudence of those in power, as perhaps the Iraq War quagmire of the early twenty-first century demonstrates. In this case, it appears the George W. Bush administration—unhappy with the limited diplomatic and military containment measures against Saddam Hussein that the George H. Bush and Clinton administrations had followed—decided, with Vietnam War-type hubris, to pursue their

32. For examples of Nixon's criticisms, see *Public Papers of the Presidents: Nixon, 1969*, 902; Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Arbor House, 1985). For Nixon's worldview, his pre-1969 role in creeping involvement, and his criticisms of Johnson, see Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War*, chaps. 2 and 3.

aims unilaterally with overwhelming force, applied suddenly through "shock and awe" from the air and on the ground. Having learned this lesson from the Vietnam experience, they assumed they could end the conventional war against Saddam's forces, engage in nation building, and withdraw most of the American troops originally committed in short order. Nonetheless, once the occupation began, a Vietnam-like insurgency emerged and the United States found itself in another creeping quicksand war.

As the old saying goes, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple," especially in the realm of politics and foreign policy—and perhaps doubly so in the case of the Nixon administration.