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ABBREVIATIONS

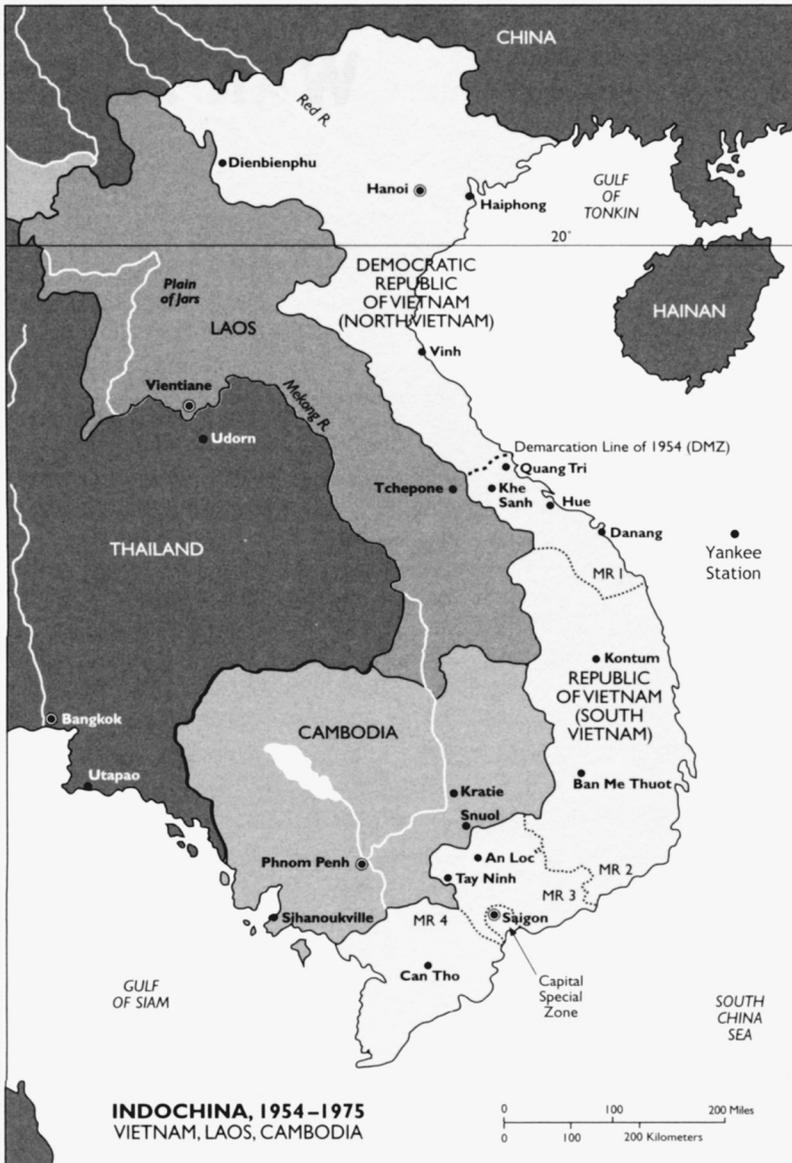
AAF	Army Air Force
AD	assured destruction
AEC	Atomic Energy Commission
ARVN	Army of the Republic of [South] Vietnam (see RVNAF)
BMEWS	Ballistic Missile Early Warning System
CDR	commander
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINC	commander in chief
CINCAL	commander in chief, Alaskan Command
CINCEUR	commander in chief, European Command
CINCLANT	commander in chief, Atlantic Command
CINCONAD	commander in chief, Continental Air Defense Command
CINCPAC	commander in chief, Pacific Command
CINCPACFLT	commander in chief, Pacific Fleet
CINCSAC	commander in chief, Strategic Air Command
CINCSTRIKE	commander in chief, Strike Command
CJCS	chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
CNO	chief of naval operations
COMIDEASTFOR	commander, Middle East Forces
COMINEFLOT	commander, Mine Flotilla
COMNAVBASE	commander, Naval Base
COMSERVPAC	Service Support Command of the US Pacific Fleet
COMSEVENTHFLT	commander, Seventh Fleet
COMSTSFE	commander, Military Sea Transportation Service, Far East
CONAD	Continental Air Defense Command (preceded NORAD)

xiv Abbreviations

COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
CTF	commander, Task Force
CTG	commander, Task Group
DCI	Director of Central Intelligence
DEFCON	defense condition
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency
DMZ	demilitarized zone
DOD	Department of Defense
DOS	Department of State
DRV	Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam
ELINT	electronic intelligence
EMCON	Emissions Control (also known as “Electronic Silence”)
FY	fiscal year
ICBM	intercontinental ballistic missile
ISA	Bureau of International Security Affairs (DOD)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JSTPS	Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff
KGB	Committee for State Security (Soviet Union)
LOC	lines of communication
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAD	mutual assured destruction
MIDEASTFOR	Middle East Forces
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NAVORDFAC	naval ordnance factory
NLF	National Liberation Front
NORAD	North American Aerospace Defense Command
NORTHAG	Northern Army Group
NSA	National Security Agency
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NSArchive	National Security Archive
NSC	National Security Council
NSSM	National Security Study Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army (also known as People’s Army of Vietnam)
PACOM	Pacific Command
POL	petroleum, oil, and lubricants
PRC	People’s Republic of China

PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (representing the NLF)
ROC	Republic of China
RVN	Republic of [South] Vietnam
RVNAF	Republic of [South] Vietnam Armed Forces (see ARVN)
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander, Europe
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SAR	sea-air rescue
SEAGA	Selective Employment of Air and Ground Alert
SIGINT	signals intelligence
SIOP	Single Integrated Operational Plan
SLBM	submarine-launched ballistic missile
SSBN	nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine
STRIKE	Strike Command
SVN	South Vietnam
TAC	Tactical Air Command
UN	United Nations
USAF	United States Air Force
USAFE	United States Air Forces Europe
USAREUR	United States Army Europe
USIB	United States Intelligence Board
USNAVEUR	United States Navy Europe
VC	Viet Cong (also known as People's Liberation Armed Forces)
WSAG	Washington Special Actions Group





Indochina, 1954-1975.

Introduction

No one really knows . . . the secret stuff we've been doing.
*Henry Kissinger and H. R. Haldeman, in conversation with Richard Nixon*¹

In October 1969, President Richard M. Nixon ordered the US high command to carry out military exercises around the world designed to be “discernible to the Soviets but should not be threatening.”² The measures carried out between 13 and 30 October collectively constituted a worldwide nuclear alert. It was a complex military operation involving a variety of military forces, from attack aircraft and strategic bombers to Polaris submarines, aircraft carriers, and destroyers. In official circles, such operations were usually referred to by other, less ominous-sounding names—“heightened alert posture,” “strategic readiness posture,” “increased readiness posture,” “readiness test,” and similarly innocuous labels stripped of the adjective *nuclear*. In this case, the operation was officially known to insiders as the Joint Chiefs of Staff [JCS] Readiness Test. It may have been one of the largest and most extensive secret military operations in US history. The American public was not informed of its execution or purpose, and even North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies were kept in the dark. Only President Nixon, his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger; Kissinger’s military assistant, Colonel Alexander Haig; the president’s chief of staff, Harry Robbins Haldeman; Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird; and his assistant, Colonel Robert Pursley, were privy to the alert’s underlying policy goals and its relationship to the Vietnam War (although Kissinger and Laird shared the secret with a few others). Surprisingly, it is possible that the JCS chairman, Earle Wheeler, the top military official in the national security structure, was not officially in the loop on this matter.

The initial objective of the alert was to signal the Soviet Union, North Vietnam’s major supplier and supporter, that the United States was preparing its air and naval forces around the world for any and all military contingencies that might arise should the president decide to escalate the

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war against North Vietnam. Since early July 1969, Nixon and Kissinger had directly and indirectly warned Hanoi's leaders that the United States would punish North Vietnam with measures of "great consequence and force" should they fail to accept US negotiating terms by 1 November 1969. The White House hoped the threat or the reality of such an attack would serve to lever Moscow's assistance in persuading Hanoi to make the military and political concessions desired by Washington and Saigon at the negotiating table in Paris. Motivating this strategy was Nixon's Madman Theory: the principle that he or any other leader could coerce an adversary by threatening to unleash extraordinary force, including nuclear force, especially if he were perceived to be unpredictable, erratic, or crazy.

This book began as an effort to chart the complex political, military, and diplomatic lead-up to the October 1969 secret nuclear alert, including the deeper background of Cold War nuclear threat making. Our exploration of new sources from the first year of the Nixon administration helped us better understand the alert in context—as part of a continuum of secret diplomatic schemes and military operations initiated by Nixon and Kissinger to bring an early end to the US military role in Vietnam. Months before the alert, they had begun applying the Madman Theory to their Vietnam policy by encouraging Hanoi and its patron, the Soviet Union, to believe that Washington would attack North Vietnam if it did not conclude an early and acceptable settlement. To fully explain the nuclear alert, we have produced the first detailed account of Nixon's and Kissinger's secret decision-making process regarding Vietnam during 1969 and the various political, diplomatic, and military elements that underlay White House threat diplomacy. As we show, both Nixon and Kissinger believed that they could use the levers of power to induce North Vietnam and the Soviet Union to take a more cooperative stance in the Vietnam negotiations. In this context, the nuclear alert was a major, even if unsuccessful, phase in the White House's secret coercive strategy.

Nixon's threat-based strategy to expedite a Vietnam settlement provided the immediate context for the alert. In September 1969, Kissinger assembled a small group of White House aides to prepare a concept plan for their so-called November Option—one that conformed to his and the president's specifications for a bombing-and-mining operation that would produce in Hanoi and North Vietnam what in a later day would be called shock and awe. Kissinger's group unofficially referred to the plan

as DUCK HOOK, a code name carried over from a heretofore unknown US Navy plan for the mining of Haiphong Harbor and the blockading of Cambodia, which had been drafted in July 1969.³ At least one of the early concept papers for the prospective November operation included options for the use of “tactical” nuclear weapons.

On Nixon’s orders and in addition to the work being carried out by Kissinger’s aides, an interservice group in Saigon worked on an operational plan for the November Option code-named PRUNING KNIFE. But the Saigon group’s views about what targets to strike and whether the operation should emphasize military rather than diplomatic outcomes soon put the two planning groups at odds. In the end, the Joint Chiefs themselves disliked both concepts, mainly because neither met their doctrinal specifications for a sound military plan emphasizing military outcomes that would benefit the war in South Vietnam.

In early October 1969, almost a month ahead of the deadline he had set and despite Hanoi’s refusal to submit to his negotiating demands, Nixon decided to abort the contemplated November bombing-and-mining offensive. Among the several reasons for his decision, the most important was probably his deep concern about possible adverse public reaction to the dramatic escalation such an operation would entail, especially given the extended length of time he and his advisers thought it would take to succeed—assuming it could succeed—and also because it would coincide with two major antiwar demonstrations scheduled for mid-October and mid-November.⁴

Instead of a bombing-and-mining campaign, Nixon went ahead in mid-October with only the JCS Readiness Test—a nuclear alert that he and Kissinger may have originally intended would precede the DUCK HOOK operation had they carried it out. They now believed or hoped there was a chance that this nuclear alert alone would jolt Moscow’s leaders into pressuring Hanoi to accept Washington’s terms at the negotiating table in Paris. Moscow and Hanoi might interpret it, for example, as a lead-up to the threatened November operation. In this way, it would lend temporary credibility to the threats they had made about taking measures of consequence and force after 1 November—even though Nixon was in no mood to follow through. Moscow and Hanoi might still cave in before the 1 November deadline and before it was clear that the United States was not going to attack North Vietnam within the time frame Nixon had warned. When launched, therefore, the JCS Readiness

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Test was a subterfuge, a bluff, and a stopgap measure. It failed in its purpose of coercing Moscow and Hanoi, as had prior warnings and signals—notably, the secret bombing of Cambodia, launched in March, and a hitherto unknown secret mining ruse against Haiphong, carried out during the spring and into the summer of 1969.

Nixon's decision not to launch a November offensive against North Vietnam and the October alert's failure to lever Soviet diplomatic assistance marked the start of a transition in administration strategy. Unable to end the war quickly on their terms through threats and military actions, Nixon and Kissinger would now attempt to liquidate the US military role in the South by placing more emphasis on another exit strategy, elements of which had been among their several policy options in 1969. Informally referred to as the "long-route" or "long-road" strategy, it included US troop withdrawals timed to be completed more or less around the time of the 1972 US presidential election, while simultaneously strengthening South Vietnamese armed forces to compensate for the US pullout. At the negotiations in Paris, Kissinger would pursue a negotiating strategy aimed at stretching out the talks and winning a settlement that would provide the government of Nguyen Van Thieu in Saigon with a "decent chance" of surviving for at least a "decent interval" after a US exit from the war—an interval of a few years that might preserve the appearance of US honor and credibility as a military guarantor of allies and client states.⁵ This approach did not mean the end of military threats and Madman diplomacy. Nixon and Kissinger still regarded those tactics as relevant, and in the years after October 1969, they continued to apply them to their Vietnam exit strategy and in other crises elsewhere in the world, notably in the Middle East.

The secret October nuclear alert and the threat diplomacy that it embodied had largely gone unnoticed by the American public and media. It remained secret until 1983, when investigative reporter Seymour Hersh published a two-page account of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) stand-down in his best-selling, award-winning book, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*. Hersh lacked documentary evidence for his account and was unaware of the other military measures taken during the eighteen-day global alert, which was then classified top secret. But drawing upon his interviews of a noncommissioned officer who had witnessed an incident during the tactical-aircraft ground alert, two of Kissinger's former aides, and a high-placed air force colonel who helped plan

the stand-down, Hersh astutely reasoned that the operation was somehow linked to Nixon's and Kissinger's Vietnam War aims and the threats they had made to attack North Vietnam. Although little was known at the time about the rumored DUCK HOOK plan, Hersh implied that both it and the stand-down were examples of Nixon's Madman Theory in action.⁶

The only direct evidence for the existence of Nixon's theory at the time was H. R. Haldeman's recollection, in his 1978 memoir, *The Ends of Power*, of a conversation about the Vietnam War with Nixon during the 1968 presidential campaign. Unlike Hersh, most reporters and historians were inexplicably skeptical,⁷ even though it was common knowledge that Haldeman had been a loyal member of Nixon's small inner circle of aides and advisers before, during, and after his presidency, as well as an inveterate notetaker and diarist.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century, those few researchers who were aware of the rumored SAC stand-down and did accept its historicity, including the present authors, knew little about it and next to nothing about the other readiness measures that made up the global alert. Within this small group—but excluding the present authors—the conventional wisdom about the purpose of the SAC stand-down was that it was connected not to Nixon's and Kissinger's concerns about Vietnam but to their worries about the possibility of a Soviet attack on China and what that would mean for the global balance of power. The assumption was that Nixon and Kissinger intended the October alert to deter such an attack.⁸

The authors of this volume were both skeptical of the Sino-Soviet thesis in varying degrees and in different ways. Burr thought it worth testing, and during the 1990s he made attempts to secure the declassification of source material to see what could be learned. Kimball initially thought the evidence he encountered when researching and writing *Nixon's Vietnam War* during the same period supported Hersh's thesis.⁹ As bits and pieces of additional evidence in favor of the Vietnam connection began to turn up in government documents declassified after the late 1990s—further confirmed by conversations and communications with former officials—Burr and Kimball teamed up in 2001 in an effort to solve the several riddles of the readiness alert. What exactly happened? What were its constituent parts? What was its purpose? In what ways was it related to the Vietnam War?

Combining the evidence we had each collected through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) filings, Mandatory Declassification Review

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(MDR) requests, interviews with participants, and extensive research in Nixon administration papers and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Department of Defense (DOD), and State Department records, we established to our satisfaction that the rumored operation had in fact taken place. We identified its constituent parts and manner of execution and, we believed, convincingly answered the question of why Nixon ordered it.

Along with other archival sources, the discovery of a file devoted to the 1969 readiness test in the records of JCS chairman Earle Wheeler and the subsequent expedited declassification by security reviewers served us well in documenting the planning process that led to the nuclear alert in its various stages, including the complex and far-flung activities that composed it. H. R. Haldeman's diary was another vital source.¹⁰ Often overlooked by researchers, it provides information on White House thinking about the Vietnam War that either is unavailable elsewhere or assists the researcher in understanding the inner circle's state of mind and establishing the time line of decision making. One major find was a crucial sentence that had been excluded from the 13 October 1969 entry in the published print and compact disc versions of the diary. The excised sentence turned up during our search through a handwritten version held in the Nixon Presidential Materials Project (which preceded the Nixon Presidential Library), in which Haldeman had recorded that Kissinger—on Nixon's authority—had set in motion a series of worldwide military measures designed to “jar” Hanoi and Moscow. Here was clear evidence from the top that the nuclear alert was connected to the administration's strategy regarding the war in Vietnam.

In June and September 2002, we presented our findings at history conferences in Athens, Georgia, and Dobbiaco/Toblach, Italy,¹¹ and two months later, we were invited to make our case to researchers at the Historian's Office of the State Department. In December and January 2003, we published two articles on the subject—one in a scholarly journal, *Cold War History*, and an abbreviated version in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which found its way to the Associated Press and Agence France Presse. The *Bulletin* article appeared at about the same time as an online “briefing book” we posted to the National Security Archive's website on 23 December. One or the other got the attention of *NBC Nightly News* and Brian Williams, who interviewed Alexander Haig three days later about the alert and the Madman Theory.¹²

The October 1969 readiness test had also attracted the interest of other

researchers. At the same June 2002 meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations in Athens, Georgia, where we had presented our findings, for example, political scientist Scott Sagan and historian Jeremi Suri also presented theirs.¹³ Although they argued in their paper that the alert was related to the Sino-Soviet crisis, they accepted our Vietnam thesis after reading our paper and considering the evidence we had accumulated. In March 2003, three months after our articles on the readiness alert had appeared, their account of the JCS Readiness Test and its Vietnam-related purpose was published in the journal *International Security*, with a focus on “political science theories concerning the role of nuclear weapons in international politics.”¹⁴

After 2003, we two went our separate ways, each working on other historical projects. But we remained interested in the topic, kept in touch, continued to collect newly declassified top secret documents, and published additional articles on the JCS Readiness Test.¹⁵ Even though there was and is no substantial direct or indirect evidence for the Sino-Soviet explanation of the 1969 global alert, adherents remained. As an example, the Sino-Soviet thesis inspired the document selections and editorial commentary on the JCS Readiness Test and Sino-Soviet tensions in a 2011 volume in the State Department’s *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* series.¹⁶

One of our purposes in writing *Nixon’s Nuclear Specter* was to resolve whatever uncertainty remains. Although we had previously written about this event, our acquisition of considerably more documentary evidence since 2003 has brought new information to light. It has provided us with not only a fuller and deeper understanding of this episode but also a fresh appreciation of the older evidence upon which we had based our earlier work on the subject. Particularly revealing has been declassified material from Kissinger’s telephone conversation transcripts, Haig’s files, the Vietnam Subject Files, and the Vietnam Country Files at the Nixon Library; mandatory review releases from Laird’s top secret records at the Washington National Records Center; JCS chairman Wheeler’s files at the National Archives; and the cable traffic of the Seventh Fleet in the western Pacific from the US Navy’s archives. The several volumes of documents from the Nixon years published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series by the State Department’s Office of the Historian and a special volume of every available record of the Dobrynin-Kissinger conversations prepared in collaboration with the Russian Foreign Ministry,

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Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, were indispensable. Although the Oval Office and Executive Office Building taping systems were not set up until February 1971, we have found several conversations that have an important bearing on Nixon's and Kissinger's views about nuclear threat making and nuclear use—the central theme of our book—as well as reflective comments by these two men on the October 1969 nuclear alert and the November Option—the main topic of the book.

These cumulative declassifications and discoveries helped us draw a detailed picture of secret decision making at the Nixon White House that has not been possible before, encompassing not only the alert but also the chain of decisions and developments that led to it. Our discoveries show Nixon and his adviser, Henry Kissinger, threatening and authorizing military actions that they believed could change the course of the Vietnam War by cowing Moscow or Hanoi into acquiescence. They also confirm that Kissinger came to accept Nixon's Madman Theory during the early months of the administration and that the decent-interval strategy played a significant role in Kissinger's diplomatic forays with Anatoly Dobrynin and in Nixon's and Kissinger's exit strategy from Vietnam. Even though policymakers before Nixon and since have believed that military force is a necessary adjunct of diplomacy, he and Kissinger may have been unique in their conviction that secret threats and stealthy military operations could actually produce desired diplomatic results. Moreover, their desire for strictly compartmentalized secrecy was so absolute and their distrust of the State Department and the military leadership so great that they put themselves in what amounted to an echo chamber that was nearly impervious to advice from experts in the national security bureaucracy. Their furtive mind-set and methods would create dysfunction in government as civilian officials and top commanders puzzled over the meaning of the policies and actions that they had taken before and during October 1969.

In addition to the considerable additional documentary evidence we have gathered, interviews with and communications from participants have added to our understanding of what happened in 1969. An interview with General William Lemnitzer, who served as a Pentagon liaison officer to the National Security Council (NSC), for instance, shed light on the mining deception plan in the spring of 1969. E-mails and telephone conversations with former NSC staffer Roger Morris helped clarify the role of nuclear options in DUCK HOOK planning, options that were subsequently confirmed by declassified documents. On the question of whether

the alert was related to issues concerning Vietnam or China, former secretary of defense Laird explained in a 2000 letter that the nuclear alert had nothing to do with China: “I think you will find that upon further reflection, Seymour Hersh will prove to be closer to Nixon’s real reason for the low-key nuclear alert exercise. The president talked to me personally about this decision before I passed the orders on to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.” When Kimball posed questions to Kissinger and Haig about this issue in 2006, Kissinger was evasive, but neither he nor Haig denied the Vietnam connection, and Haig positively affirmed that “readiness measures” had been launched in connection with DUCK HOOK and its cancellation. Indirect evidence came from a conversation in 2013 with Stanford University professor David Holloway: Kissinger had told him earlier in the year that the alert had been about Vietnam, not China. He did not realize at the time how worried the Chinese were about the Soviet threat. None of these and other interviews could convey the full complexity of the events of 1969, but they provided firsthand information from officials who had been there at the scene.¹⁷

To put the October 1969 nuclear alert in the broadest historical context, we have placed its origins and execution against the backdrop of the perilous history of nuclear threat making before 1968 and Nixon’s and Kissinger’s secretive direction of Vietnam War policy after 1968. Our story begins in chapter 1 with a survey of nuclear diplomacy and brinkmanship during various Cold War crises between the West and the East from 1945 to 1968. It was in this period that Nixon and Kissinger developed their worldviews about diplomacy, military affairs, and revolution—including the long-running anticolonial and then postcolonial revolution in Vietnam.

Chapter 2 explores Nixon’s and Kissinger’s immersion in the culture of “the Bomb” during the 1950s and 1960s—the key decades in which their strategic views about threat diplomacy originated and ripened. It was in this period and during and after his association with President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles that Nixon developed his Madman Theory.

Chapters 3 through 5 describe the carrot-and-stick diplomacy of Nixon and Kissinger toward the Soviet Union and North Vietnam as well as the initial military measures and threat strategies they developed to solve what they called their Vietnam problem. These included early proposals for feigned nuclear attacks, a secret B-52 bombing campaign against

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targets along the Cambodian border with South Vietnam, and diplomatic and military schemes such as the so-called Vance Ploy and a mining deception operation against North Vietnam. Chapters 6 through 8 detail the environment of military, diplomatic, and national and international events in which the administration's prospective November 1969 bombing-and-mining operation against North Vietnam was conceived and subsequently aborted.

Chapter 9 is devoted to a description and analysis of the Joint Chiefs' implementation of the global nuclear alert and of what can be gleaned about Soviet and North Vietnamese reactions to it. The epilogue includes a discussion of the aftermath of Nixon's and Kissinger's failed threats and military measures of 1969; an analysis of their policies and strategies during the remaining years of the American war in Vietnam; assessments of their post-nuclear alert applications of the Madman Theory, especially in relation to nuclear threat making; and reflections on how the American war in Vietnam ended.

In addition to the legacy of nuclear threat making since 1945 and the wartime challenges and dilemmas Nixon and his closest advisers believed they faced in Vietnam, the complicated historical context in which the 1969 global alert evolved also involved Nixon's personality and his penchant for secrecy; Kissinger's relationship with Nixon and his affinity for compartmentalizing the work of his staff; personal and interdepartmental rivalries within the Nixon administration; electoral politics; public opinion; the administration's public relations strategies; intermediaries to Hanoi; citizen activism for and against the war; the influence of the "taboo" against nuclear use; and the policies and strategies of the Politburo in Hanoi, the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) in the South, the government of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in Saigon, and the Soviet and Chinese governments. For all players in the drama, moreover, chance, contingency, dogmatism, doubt, and improvisation influenced their best-laid plans.

Despite the scale and scope of the secret nuclear readiness test of October 1969, Nixon, Kissinger, Haig, and Haldeman made only indirect and cryptic references to it in their memoirs. (This was even truer of the April to July mining readiness test, which none of them ever mentioned.) Perhaps they thought the October alert was too sensitive an operation, or they worried that such hastily improvised measures would not withstand public scrutiny. Or perhaps they did not want to revisit the desperate and

wishful thinking that encouraged them to believe that the specter of nuclear threats exemplified by alert military forces would induce Moscow to provide greater assistance on the Vietnam problem. Whatever the reason, the nuclear readiness test demonstrated their conviction that a show of force was essential to salvaging US Vietnam policy and the credibility of American power. It failed, but it nevertheless marked a turning point in Nixon's and Kissinger's strategy to get out of Vietnam on terms they deemed acceptable. Although their strategy evolved, their faith in coercive threat making remained to the end of the American war in Vietnam.



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