- POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

"THE LOST PEACE" by ALLAN E. GOODMAN

1975 - GENERAL
THE LOST PEACE

America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War

By
Allan E. Goodman

With a Foreword by Ambassador William H. Sullivan

Hoover Institution
on War, Revolution and Peace
Stanford, California
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Lost Peace</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1962-1965: The Vietnam Negotiations and the Roots of the War</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1965-1967: The Search for Negotiations and Protracted War</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1968: &quot;We Were Defeating Ourselves&quot;</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1969: &quot;The only way to end the war by negotiations is to prove Saigon can win it.&quot;</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>From Breakthrough to Breakdown.</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>From the Breakdown to the Christmas Bombing</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>What Went Wrong?</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Footnotes</td>
<td>473</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PROLOGUE

When Hsüan-tsung became Emperor in 1425, the Chinese administration in Southern Vietnam had been under siege for nine years. China's economic problems, the ineptness of her generals, the long sea and overland supply lines, coupled to Le Loi's (the Vietnamese Emperor) guerrilla tactics and his ability to use Laos as a sanctuary, had combined to convince Hsüan-tsung that the war was unwinnable and that a negotiated settlement should be sought.

But Hsüan-tsung's ministers believed too much was at stake to compromise. One history of the period notes that the war so troubled the Emperor that after a sleepless night he told his ministers of his desire to withdraw from the war and to grant autonomy to the Vietnamese. "He quoted the Ancestral Instructions' admonitions against offensive wars and said that the original intention [of his predecessors] was not to make Vietnam a Chinese province but to restore the legitimate . . . rulers." To cease the struggle now, his ministers argued, however, would "mean giving up twenty years of labor and would also lessen China's prestige in the eyes of the world." So the war continued.

By the winter of 1426, Le Loi alternated guerrilla attacks with conventional assaults on Chinese forts. The Chinese army suffered numerous defeats; in one battle alone, between 20,000 and 30,000 soldiers were lost. But it was Le Loi who proposed a truce: if the Chinese army withdrew, Le Loi would recognize as king a descendant of the dynasty the Chinese were seeking to restore to the throne. Hsüan-tsung's ministers branded Le Loi's
proposal a ruse and argued that a reinforced army could yet win 
the war. While the Chinese debated this, the Vietnamese defeated 
the reinforced army. When Hsüan-tsung's representatives reached 
Vietnam to negotiate, Le Loi refused.

The advocates of the war died in disgrace. But a hundred 
years later, Chinese historians said that Hsüan-tsung's diplomacy 
had lost the war and had encouraged the barbarians to be contemp-
tuous of Chinese power. "In war," Sun Tzu said, "let your great 
object be victory."

--Based on an account compiled by Jung-pang Lo from the 
Ming Hsüan-tsung Shih-Lu and the Shu-yü Chou-tzu Lu.

What will be the consequences if Viet-Nam and Cambodia did 
fall? It is a debate which has been going on for a long time. 
I believe, and the Administration believes, that if Viet-Nam 
falls as a result of an American decision to cut off its aid, 
that this will have, over a period of time, the most serious 
consequences for the conduct of our foreign policy. This will 
not be immediately apparent, but over a period of years it must 
raise the gravest doubts in the minds of many countries that have 
been associated with us, or of many countries to which the threat 
cannot be given a terminal date.

PREFACE

Lost Peace tells the story of America's decade-long search for a negotiated settlement of the conflict in Vietnam.

It seems as inconceivable to me now as it did in 1965 that the United States would have become so deeply involved in a country of so little strategic importance, with whose culture we were so thoroughly unfamiliar, and about whose internal conflicts we had so little understanding. But ideas have consequences for action that gave Americans in the early 1960s a parochial view of our stake in internal conflicts beyond our borders. The widely held belief that every challenge to political order in changing societies was communist-inspired and would, unless checked, advance communist interests, thus thrust the struggle in Vietnam to center-stage and cast it in familiar terms for nearly a decade.

In 1965, the integrity of the free world and the credibility of American power required our presence in Vietnam. By 1975, these principles, many thought, could best be served by liquidating our commitment to Vietnam altogether. The history of what America sought through fighting and negotiating in Vietnam is thus as profoundly affected by changes in the nature of support for foreign policy within the United States as by events on the battlefields of South Vietnam. Above all, to the statesmen quoted in this book the changes Vietnam wrought in American society were more shocking than the collapse of Saigon itself.

My sources -- ranging from Presidents to interpreters -- included most of the Americans and non-communist Vietnamese
involved since 1962 in the search for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. My interviews were conducted off-the-record because many of these officials still were in office when I interviewed them. I was unable, however, to interview any officials of the DRV or the PRG. While the State Department authorized travel to Hanoi, the North Vietnamese refused to issue a visa. I then sought out several DRV officials posted abroad and reported to be knowledgeable about the negotiations -- one had read, I was told, Tad Szulc's account of the Kissinger-Tho talks appearing in Foreign Policy magazine, and was prepared to comment on it to me. Our point of contact was to be the DRV Embassy in Vientiane, Laos. While I was given several appointments, these were always cancelled within hours of the appointed time. So, what I have to say about Hanoi's diplomacy is based on what North Vietnamese leaders have written over the years for public consumption and certain other material -- clearly indicated in the text -- that fell into the hands of U.S. and GVN forces on the battlefield. I also interviewed many who travelled widely to both North Vietnam and the PRG-controlled territory of South Vietnam in 1973 and 1974.

In any such account, of course, there are bound to be errors of omission. There is also a problem of perspective. By interviewing so many involved at different stages and staff levels in the negotiations, I may have compiled a picture that shows more detail than the one the principals actually had in mind when they were negotiating. That is why, whenever I could let a principal speak for himself -- on or off the record -- I chose
to quote his remarks at length.

My most sincere thanks are due to the officers and staff of the Hoover Institution for their generous support of my research and writing while a National Fellow in 1974-1975. Dennis L. Bark and Alexander George, in particular, were constant sources of good advice and help. The collection of pertinent documents for this study--now available at the Hoover Institution archives--was supported by several generous grants from the Francis A. Harrington Public Affairs Fund of the Department of Government and International Relations at Clark University where I served as Chairman from 1971 to 1974.

Donald Brennan, Michael Cotter and Samuel Huntington reviewed my early outlines and helped to improve them. Linda Leiss and Ann Elliot cheerfully typed and re-typed this manuscript, while W. Ann Garvey, a comparative literature major at Stanford University, edited it. I am also grateful to Jerry M. Silverman and Cung Thuc Tien, whose kind hospitality in Saigon during January 1975 greatly facilitated interviewing during a difficult and uncertain period. And, finally, I want to acknowledge the help of Keith Gardiner who provided exceedingly insightful comments on the concluding chapter.

But without the insight and encouragement of my wife Collette, who first suggested the idea, I would never have written Lost Peace.

Allan E. Goodman
Washington, D.C.
August 1975
Chapter 1

The Lost Peace

After more than a decade of struggle, America and those we supported in Indochina lost their attempted social revolution, their war, and their peace. The peace America had sought, as this book will show, could not be prefabricated for the Vietnamese in Paris conference rooms. The peace that, as President Lyndon Johnson said on 31 March 1968, "will one day stop the bloodshed . . ., [permit] all the Vietnamese people . . . to rebuild and develop their land, . . . [and] permit us to turn more fully to our own tasks here at home" came with an American defeat.

Lost Peace explains why Washington's decade-long secret search for a negotiated settlement failed to end the Vietnam war. This book is not intended to be the definitive history of the period, but an initial description of the diplomacy behind the longest, most costly, least successful war of our history. Three questions are of central concern:

-- Could the conflict that divided Vietnam for nearly thirty years have been settled by negotiations?

-- Could the 1973 Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam have been reached sooner?

-- Why did the Paris Agreement break down?
In answering these questions, I have tried to reconstruct the most significant events and developments that affected Washington's search for a negotiated settlement of the war. My account is based almost entirely on off-the-record interviews with decision-makers in Washington and Saigon; I wanted Lost Peace to tell the story of what happened and why, from their perspective. But I have also tried to verify what I was told with the public record and found that record both surprisingly large, rich in detail, and closely reflective of the private views of the principals. I do not expect, therefore, that the official record, if and when it is released, will require of this account the same degree of revision required of pre-Pentagon Papers assessments of U.S. decision-making with respect to the war.

The secret search for negotiations over Vietnam began in 1962, reflecting President John F. Kennedy's belief that the settlement then negotiated for Laos would be meaningless without providing also for the neutralization of Vietnam. Neither the President nor his representatives believed Hanoi would oppose such negotiations. Nor did they believe Hanoi would view its ultimate objective in Indochina achievable only by a war with the United States, a war sure to occur if an ally of the U.S. were suddenly invaded by conventional communist military forces. But President Kennedy's initiatives to avoid war were probably interpreted by Hanoi as a sign that the U.S. desperately wanted to avoid another land war in Asia, particularly since the conflict in Vietnam was so wholly a struggle between two groups of Vietnamese nationalists. Kennedy's assassination cut short further crystallization of the
debate over whether the conflict in Vietnam was part of a worldwide communist assault on democracy or a civil war. By the time President Johnson was prepared to make a decision on Vietnam, he believed that the political instability following the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem, coupled to the violations of the demilitarized zone by the North Vietnamese, left him little choice. The U.S., President Johnson believed, had to stand firm on a set of goals—namely, the cessation of communist-sponsored violence in and the end of NVA (North Vietnamese Army) infiltration into the South—that, he realized, were beyond the capabilities of both Washington and Saigon to achieve on the battlefield. President Johnson sought negotiations precisely when they were least likely to occur. In 1964 and 1965, in retrospect, the United States had little with which to compel Hanoi to negotiate, and United States intelligence assessments consistently demonstrated that from North Vietnamese perspective, the conflict had not yet reached the fighting-while-negotiating stage.

NVA attacks on American forces in Vietnam during 1965, rather than hasten the realization on Washington's part that neither the US nor the GVN could win the war, provoked an escalatory reaction aimed at protecting American forces, discouraging Hanoi from continuing such attacks, and compelling Hanoi to negotiate. While the relationship between diplomacy and fighting in this year is too complex for facile summary here, President Johnson basically concluded that there was no practicable way to protect American forces short of winning the war or withdrawing from it. A token US military presence would not discourage Hanoi from continuing
the war, and nothing could force Hanoi to negotiate as long as it viewed negotiations as useful only after achieving a position of strength on the battlefield and in the political arena of South Vietnam. Eschewing a unilateral US troop withdrawal, the President sought to deprive Hanoi of its position of strength it sought by increasing substantially the size and mission of the US presence in Vietnam. In 1965, Mr. Johnson believed that time was on his side, US military power could not be defeated, and rather than risk losing the war, Hanoi would eventually negotiate.

As the war intensified in 1966 and 1967, the prospects for negotiations, however, dimmed. Within the US government, agreement could not be reached on an appropriate minimum position also acceptable to Hanoi. Hanoi remained adamant in refusing to enter talks as long as the bombing of North Vietnam continued. And the efforts of allies of both to arrange talks tended to convince each that the other was ingenuous about such talks in the first place. The search for a basis for negotiation was also complicated during these years by the fact that to both Washington and Hanoi, the war appeared winnable. Washington believed this largely because the political and military situation in South Vietnam by 1967 had dramatically improved over what it had been in 1964 and 1965. Hanoi believed it could win the war because it was beginning to expand its political control to areas under the nominal authority of the GVN and saw the American presence -- and thereby its impact on the long term revolutionary struggle -- as only temporary.

Unquestionably, it was the shock of the 1968 Tet offensive
on the American polity -- particularly on the principal advisors to President Johnson -- that led to the change in the US position on bombing. This made the initiation of direct official talks between Washington and Hanoi possible for the first time in the war. But, as in Korea, the start of negotiations did not signal the beginning of the end of the war. Negotiations did not change the image each side had of the other's motives for negotiating. The negotiations did coincide with the gradual withdrawal of American forces and equally gradual changes in secret of the US negotiating position. These changes -- coupled to the irreversible process of the American troop withdrawal -- convinced Hanoi, however, that the longer it waited, the less likely was the US and its ally to win the war, and the more concessions Henry Kissinger was likely to make in his secret talks with Le Duc Tho. When a breakthrough in the negotiations was finally achieved, the same misperception about how flexible each side could be that had led to war in the first place, led to the breakdown of the negotiating process. Ultimately, the incompatibilities in the goals of both sides led to the breakdown of the 1973 Paris Agreement altogether.

These, in sum, are the events described in Lost Peace.

The historical narratives dealing with these events outline the scope of each diplomatic initiative and its relationship to each side's war strategy and to the prevailing military situation. I pay particular attention to what Hanoi and Washington appeared to learn from diplomacy about each other's will to continue the war and their strategy for fighting it. I stress this because I
believe that the behind-the-scenes diplomacy, and, later, the secret negotiations themselves, reinforced Washington's and Hanoi's images of each other's intransigence. This, coupled to Hanoi's strategy of protracting the fighting and Washington's counter-strategy of gradual escalation, contributed to prolonging the war and vitiating efforts to end it with a negotiated agreement.

In particular, the U.S. strategy of escalation—more than Hanoi's strategy of protracted struggle—prolonged the war, as my account will show. Hanoi had little choice with respect to strategy. Its resources and political military capabilities in the South required a protracted war. Escalation—one of a number of ways the U.S. could have chosen to fight the war—provided Hanoi with a symbol (the bombing) to rally support for holding out. Escalation also provided Hanoi time to adjust to each new increment of force, and—in terms of the public antipathy each step up the escalation ladder generated from 1966 onward in the U.S.—a ready index of Washington's waning will to continue the war.

When an agreement was reached, consequently, Hanoi did not change its view that it could still achieve its maximum goal: the liberation of the South. As the provisions of the Paris Agreement broke down, Hanoi again sought victory on the battle field. Many U.S. officials, however, now firmly believe that had the Nixon administration not been immobilized by Watergate and had Congress not voted to cut off funds for the air war in Indochina, the U.S. would have retained a credible capacity to discourage Hanoi from violating the Agreement. And, these officials believe, had the Congress supported administration proposals for
adequate assistance to Saigon, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) would not have collapsed—and with it the GVN itself—in the face of the threat of an NVA offensive. But there is nothing in the history of the past decade in Vietnam to suggest that without Watergate and with Nixon in the White House still, Hanoi would have behaved any differently than it did in 1975. So also, there is nothing to suggest that with even the requested level of U.S. assistance in 1974 and 1975, the GVN would have undertaken the military, political and economic reforms so necessary to arresting the internal decay of the Thieu government.

Because of the detailed nature of the substantive negotiations I describe, I urge the reader to keep in mind that any negotiation, no matter how intense, secret, or technical, is not conducted in isolation. During the decade of the search for a negotiated settlement, U.S. relations with the Communist world changed as did political forces within the Communist world itself. The shift from hostility to détente with the Soviet Union, the discovery that the conflict in Vietnam was not linked to a series of world-wide struggles against imperialism, the rapprochement with China, and continued warfare in the Middle East—to mention only a few of the most critical developments constantly on policymakers' minds—tended to heighten desires to end the Vietnam war by negotiations, to demonstrate to allies and adversaries alike that conflicts could be resolved peacefully, and to reduce the drain on American military and economic resources that the war entailed. Thus, while secret U.S. concessions to Hanoi often made no sense in terms of the battlefield situation (i.e., they...
conferred advantages on Hanoi that its military position did not actually warrant), such concessions were rationalized by referring to such overall goals of U.S. foreign policy as the need to eliminate "hotbeds of tension," to normalize relations with the communist world, and to give the U.S. presence abroad its lowest profile since the end of World War Two.

Henry Kissinger once wrote that the Greek god Nemesis ought to be the patron saint of history, for Nemesis punished man by fulfilling his wishes. The Vietnam experience points up the relevance of Kissinger's point. For in Vietnam, nearly every wish policy-makers had was fulfilled: we maintained a massive military and economic commitment throughout the war, nearly every program we pressed on the Vietnamese they adopted, and we signed an agreement that, it was officially declared, had brought peace with honor. What went wrong, then, occurred not in the processes by which our objectives were sought but in how those objectives were formulated in the first place. It was our vision of the world and not our power in it that was faulty. It is, of course, far easier to debate and question the exercise of power and not its purposes. Because of this tendency, mankind has tended to learn the wrong lessons from experience. Thus is human history largely a record of the power of states dissipated by pursuing objectives persistently beyond their reach.

So it was throughout the decade of the Vietnam negotiations. As the following pages will show, rather than serve as an alternative to warfare, the Vietnam negotiations were an extension of it.
Each side delayed entering talks until they thought they had achieved a position of strength. When talks did begin, however, there was no negotiation: each side believed that the other would sign an agreement based on what had been achieved on the battlefield, not by bargaining over what was legitimate to achieve. Throughout the decade of Vietnam negotiations, both Washington and Hanoi believed in force, not diplomacy. When adversaries thus enter negotiations while still fighting, it is nearly always to reduce the costs of continuing the war, not to compromise on ways to end it.

For communists, the problem of negotiating is knowing when to use it as a tactic of warfare. But for Americans, the Vietnam negotiations ran counter to deeply held attitudes. Our conception of negotiation is a process of bargaining and concession; the outcome of negotiation is compromise. We expect to bargain and we expect that a military stalemate will cause our adversaries to do the same. For Americans, the problem of negotiating with communists is finding the right conceptual framework--i.e., the bigger picture within which concessions by our adversary are possible.

Negotiating while fighting served Hanoi's purposes far better than Washington's. Hanoi used negotiation as a tactic of warfare, convinced that only a military victory, not concessions at a conference table, could end the war. But the United States lacked a strategy for either winning the war or depriving the North Vietnamese of the tactical advantages they sought in negotiations. Washington wanted the fruits of a military victory
without actually winning one. Washington sought the status-quo ante: the end of Hanoi's military support to the communist movement in South Vietnam. While Washington raised the cost of Hanoi's continuing to do this, U.S. spokesmen repeatedly assured Hanoi that the U.S. did not seek the destruction of North Vietnam. Escalating aerial attacks against North Vietnam was viewed as the principal means of getting Hanoi to the conference table. But the more the U.S. bombed North Vietnam, the less there was to bomb and the greater was Hanoi's will to resist. Hanoi consequently fought on, realizing that if Washington only wanted to restore the status quo in the South—a status quo that, perforce, included the National Liberation Front as a political force, the North Vietnamese could not lose by continuing the war. The longer the war lasted, North Vietnamese leaders reasoned, the more concessions Washington would make to end it.

Nearly every time Washington made an offer to Hanoi, the terms softened. The desire for negotiations itself, consequently, was viewed as a sign of American weakness. Every concession Washington offered Hanoi in private served as another wedge between Washington and Saigon; and every concession Hanoi hinted at in public it rejected in private, and this widened the gap between the U.S. administration and the public.

Many have suggested that Washington was ill-prepared for such negotiations with Hanoi. General Maxwell Taylor, in his memoirs, in fact, characterized Washington's diplomacy as inept and its negotiators as unprepared:
We should have learned from two frustrating years of wrangling at Panmunjom what to expect from Communist negotiators in terms of stalling, bluffing, propagandizing, and avoiding substantive discussions. After the Korean Armistice, Admiral Joy, one of the principal negotiators, wrote an excellent book[^2] on the subject which should have been required reading by all the members of the delegation which we sent to Paris. Before departing, they should have war-gamed the negotiations in the presence of senior officials with past experience in negotiating with Communists. By this device, they could have prepared themselves to meet the important issues which they could expect to face in Paris and they could have tested alternative means of dealing with them. Unfortunately, I have encountered few officials out of uniform who believe in the need for such thoroughness, and the outcome of our past negotiations results at least in part from our tendency to take such preparations lightly[^3].

The consequence of this lack of forward planning about the negotiations, Harvard Professor Henry Kissinger observed, was that "Our diplomacy and our strategy were conducted in isolation from each other."[^4] When American envoys were offering Hanoi peace, American warplanes were escalating the war. When American presidents declared their support for a negotiated settlement, our Saigon ally denounced it. When Hanoi finally agreed to talks, U.S. diplomats not only had to negotiate with an intransigent Hanoi, but also with equally intransigent bureaucracies in Washington and Saigon.
But the real obstacle to a negotiated settlement was neither Washington's diplomacy nor Hanoi's intransigence. The causes of the war basically were not negotiable. As Hanoi maintained ever since its first direct conversation with Washington in 1962, negotiations could not be expected to settle a conflict so fundamentally linked to the course of a revolution. Thus, neither fighting for an ally that could not defend itself, nor negotiating with an adversary that did not believe in compromise, ended the war or brought peace to Vietnam.
Chapter 2

1962-1965: The Vietnam Negotiations and the Roots of the War

The partition of Vietnam in 1954, despite the military defeat of the French in the battle for Dien Bien Phu, meant that the North Vietnamese achieved less at the conference table than they had won on the battlefield. They resolved to never let this happen again. By the early 1960s, the North Vietnamese had come to see negotiations for their tactical value only. Thus what Hanoi would seek in direct talks with the U.S. was a way to improve its chances of winning a war, not preventing or ending one.

Fighting and Negotiating: The View From Hanoi

Hanoi's strategy of fighting-while-negotiating reflects three principles learned from experience.1 The first, General Vo Nguyen Giap called the "tradition of determination to fight and win," and it stemmed from the Dien Bien Phu experience. In the pre-talks period this meant that Hanoi would not respond to U.S. offers made during bombing pauses to avoid suggesting that bombing could affect North Vietnamese behavior. Once actually engaged in talks, Hanoi coordinated the military with the diplomatic struggle, so that negotiation became an extension of warfare. As Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese Army, General Nguyen Van Vinh observed in a major speech in early 1966, "Fighting while negotiating is aimed at opening another front with a view to making the puppet army more disintegrated, stimulating and developing the enemy's internal contradictions, and thereby making him more isolated in order to deprive him of the propaganda weapons . . . "2
Hanoi's second principle of fighting-while-negotiating required a commitment to a **protracted** struggle. As one member of the Politburo observed:

> Time works for us. Time will be our best strategist. 
> ... To protract the war is the key to victory ... if we prolong the war ... our forces will grow stronger, the enemy forces will be weakened. ... Those who want "lightening resistance war and rapid victory," who want to bring the whole of our forces to the battlefront to win a speedy victory and rapidly to decide the outcome of the war, do not profit from the invaluable experiences of history. ... All they would achieve would be the premature sacrifice of the bulk of forces in a few adventurous battles; they would commit heroic but useless suicide. ³

If negotiations were to be used as a tactic, then protracting them would be as essential as protracting the war itself. To do one would attrite the enemy's war-making resources, while to do the other would attrite the enemy's will.

The third operational principle of Hanoi's fighting-while-negotiating strategy required that decisions about war and peace be insulated from the pressure of its allies.⁴ Ever since the 1954 Geneva Conference, Hanoi had been fearful that Moscow and, to a lesser extent, Peking would promote negotiations that were premature, given what could be achieved on the battlefield, and would be conducted according to an agenda not set by the Politburo in Hanoi. Consequently, the North Vietnamese were consistently unresponsive when Moscow either acted as an intermediary
or tried to promote negotiations. And, for their part, China did not try to act as a broker: Chinese leaders consistently told U.S. visitors to Peking that the question of whether or when to negotiate were issues on which Hanoi would accept no advice. In 1960, Hanoi decided that the South could be liberated only through a military struggle because of the growing strength of the Diem government and the political repression on which its authority rested. This liberation struggle was to be fought by guerrillas in the jungle; the decline of governmental authority in the countryside would precipitate Diem's collapse. The neutralist coalition of transition that then emerged would ask the U.S. to end its military programs in South Vietnam. Thereafter, the NLF would dominate the coalition and initiate the process of reunification. Since from Hanoi's perspective the collapse of Diem and the departure of the Americans in its wake were inevitable, there was no need to negotiate with the United States in the early 1960s.

President Kennedy wanted negotiations, not war

In July 1962, the overriding U.S. objective was to limit American involvement in what President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara believed was essentially a Vietnamese war. President Kennedy, moreover, believed that U.S. security interests were linked not to the fate of Indochina, but to developments in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Thus, as the Geneva Accords in Laos were signed, President Kennedy asked the Secretary of Defense to initiate plans for a phased withdrawal
of U.S. advisors from South Vietnam and a scaling down of the military assistance program. In part, the phased withdrawal program was rooted in false optimism about the strength of the Diem government, the impact of the newly-created strategic hamlet program, and the belief that the NLF would continue to pose only a minor threat to the GVN in the countryside. The President believed, however, that if any of these factors should change, the way to counter their effects was through diplomacy, not military intervention. Senator Mike Mansfield, who travelled to Southeast Asia in October 1962 at President Kennedy's request, agreed, suggesting that should the situation change for the worse, "We may well discover that it is in our interests to do less rather than more than we are now doing. If that is the case, we will do well to concentrate on a vigorous diplomacy without bringing about sudden and catastrophic upheavals in Southeast Asia."  

Was an important opportunity to avoid war overlooked when Washington failed to follow up the Geneva Conference on Laos with one on Vietnam? The head of one Asian delegation to the conference later told me in an interview, "It was clear to us that the 1962 Laotian settlement would not work without some kind of agreement on Vietnam. All the diplomats at Geneva knew there would be a terrible war in South Vietnam unless Washington and Hanoi could reach a diplomatic accommodation. Washington was in a particularly anti-communist mood, however; if communism wanted a fight in South Vietnam, the Americans boasted, it would be defeated in South Vietnam." But behind the scenes at Geneva the search for a
diplomatic accommodation had already begun. President Kennedy feared that unless diplomacy prevailed, America would be compelled to fight in Vietnam.

The President had, in fact, authorized W. Averell Harriman and his deputy William Sullivan (later a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State deeply involved in the negotiations during the Johnson and Nixon administrations) to approach the North Vietnamese delegates at the Geneva Conference with an offer of secret talks. The President wanted Hanoi to know that Washington regarded the conflict in South Vietnam as an internal Vietnamese affair. Harriman and Sullivan were to suggest that the Laos Accords could serve as a model for an agreement guaranteeing Vietnam's neutrality. The diplomatic overture to Hanoi had to be kept secret because, as one of Washington's emissaries put it, "To broadcast our meeting with North Vietnam would have alarmed the South Vietnamese who opposed such contacts. We knew if we were successful with Hanoi, we would have to bring Saigon around."

The meeting and the site were arranged by the discrete Foreign Minister of a neutral country attending the conference, and Harriman and Sullivan took an elaborate detour through back alleys in order to avoid being seen by any of their South Vietnamese colleagues. They met with the Foreign Minister of North Vietnam and his military assistant, Colonel Ha Van Lau, who, like Sullivan, would later participate in the secret Paris talks.

The ninety-minute session began with Harriman observing that he was the same age as Ho Chi Minh, and, like Ho, shared the dream of enjoying old age with Vietnam at peace. A step in that
direction could be taken that day, Harriman suggested. If agreement was possible on Laos, one should be no less possible on Vietnam.

The representatives from Hanoi responded that the Four-Point Manifesto of the NLF was the only basis for peace in Vietnam. This Manifesto called for the immediate withdrawal of all "personnel of U.S. satellites and allies," and the establishment of a "national coalition government to guarantee peace, organize elections, promulgate democratic liberties, release political prisoners, and abolish all monopolies." If the U.S. wanted peace in the region, the North Vietnamese declared, all it had to do was withdraw its personnel from Vietnam and end its support to the Diem government. Because the U.S. was illegally supporting an illegitimate government, there was, in essence, nothing to negotiate about. "I don't think they believed that we would stand firm or commit more troops than the 16,000 we already had in South Vietnam," one of the Americans at the meeting later told me in an interview. "They thought then that South Vietnam would be theirs in a matter of months or years and that, therefore, there was no need to enter negotiations to get what would certainly come through our default." Further efforts to engage the North Vietnamese in talks were rebuffed for the next eighteen months as Hanoi, not without reason, expected the Saigon government to collapse. By the end of 1962, it was clear that the Diem government's tenuous hold on the countryside was slipping, the strategic hamlet program failing, and Saigon's army no match for the NLFs mobile guerrilla teams or the small
conventional units that could lure GVN troops into carefully planned ambushes.

By 1963, Hanoi saw political developments in Saigon as a prelude to a communist-dominated South Vietnam. GVN repression had provoked a crisis between the Catholic elite and the urban Buddhists. Such repression alienated the Americans, who, already upset with the inability of the Diem government to initiate long-promised administrative and political reforms, encouraged a coup against Diem. But once in power, the coup leaders could not agree on who should head the government, or on how the army could be mobilized into an effective fighting force. The communists expected the Americans to be further alienated by squabbles between these Vietnamese politicians and, consequently, to reduce support to Diem's successors. Loss of US support would thus provoke a "crisis of confidence," permitting the NLF to take the initiative in creating a Government of National Union, a coalition which the communists could dominate. The consolidation of communist power in South Vietnam would be complete when the Catholics--their ranks thinned by the assassination of anti-communist leaders--gradually adapted to life within a communist state, and the new Government of National Union in the South began talks with the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, i.e., North Vietnam) about unification.

Washington's secret diplomacy in 1962 and 1963 was not aimed at persuading Hanoi that its image of the future was incorrect, but that the methods it had thus far employed -- assassination, terrorism, use of the demilitarized zone for military purposes,
and violation of the neutrality of Cambodia and Laos--constituted a threat to peace in Southeast Asia. The United States would respond, diplomats warned Hanoi, should peace continue to be violated; aggression would be countered. Hanoi's diplomats did not, however, try to persuade Washington that the conflict in Vietnam was strictly an internal affair. Their propaganda suggested, instead, that it was part of a worldwide struggle against imperialism. "At the time," one high White House official later recalled, "there was plenty of evidence to suggest that the domino theory was valid."

A revolutionary movement can thus hamstring those with a commitment to preserve the status-quo by behaving as if there is no alternative to war. The revolutionary sees only struggle, not peace, as inevitable. Consequently, when a status-quo power asks for negotiations, the revolutionary interprets this as a call for surrender. When the status-quo power threatens war if negotiations do not start promptly, the revolutionary sees in war a prophecy fulfilled and argues that peace will come only when the status-quo is destroyed. And, finally, when the fighting has begun and the status-quo power proposes negotiations to end it, the revolutionary interprets this as a sign of the latter's weakness. Having fundamentally different conceptions of the meaning of the conflict by the end of 1963, Hanoi's and Washington's diplomacy reinforced misperceptions that would ultimately lead to war.
President Johnson went to war

In 1966, I asked one of President Kennedy's most senior and trusted aides if there would have been a war in Vietnam had Kennedy lived. He replied that he never stopped to think about that question. "The day after the assassination, I had to brief President Johnson about Vietnam. He realized that the administration had been deeply divided by the war and made it plain that encouraging the coup against Diem was a mistake, a product of these internal divisions. 'We can't get out of there while its such a mess; at least Diem represented stability,' the President said. 'Now, I want no more back-biting and no more internal debate,' Johnson continued, 'I will set a policy soon and want it carried out firmly and with loyalty.'" My source then concluded his anecdote by answering my question: "When you worked for Lyndon Johnson you didn't think about what might have been, but about what was."

The assassination of President Kennedy deprived the country of a policy debate over the wisdom of becoming deeply involved in a civil war. President Johnson did not encourage debate over the Vietnam involvement as Saigon bordered on the edge of anarchy--anarchy brought on, in Johnson's view, by the internal divisions within the U.S. government that had led to American support of a coup. That nearly all President Kennedy's advisors who stayed on through 1964 turned against the war when they left office raises a tantalizing question. If Kennedy had lived, or if they had left office sooner, would their doubts have surfaced earlier? Would a debate on Vietnam outside the White House have
been more acceptable to President Johnson and given him pause to think about the costs and benefits of a deeper involvement in Indochina? Lacking such a debate outside the White House and discouraging it within, President Johnson believed he inherited a commitment, not the responsibility to decide if one should be made.

The President believed his decision was whether Americans should fight a war for victory or for the very negotiations his predecessor had tried to start. If the U.S. sought military victory, Americans themselves might have to fight a land war in Asia; if negotiations were sought, the United States had little guarantee in 1964 that Hanoi would be more willing to compromise in its struggle to liberate the South and unify Vietnam than it had been in 1962. Indeed, to Hanoi, the "correlation of forces"--the North Vietnamese term for the progress of their social, political and military struggles--from 1962 to 1967 did not permit negotiations to take place. This did not mean that Hanoi was stalemated militarily, or that the government in Saigon had developed the administrative or military capability or the political support necessary to compete effectively with the NLF. Rather, Hanoi's lack of interest in negotiations reflected dissatisfaction with the success of its own military struggle and with the meagre extent of the NLF's control in the countryside.

To many of the President's advisors, Hanoi's intransigence was not entirely unwelcome. "That Saigon could have survived a negotiated settlement," one later told me in an interview, "seemed to us then inconceivable. We were in a terrible bind:"
if we started to negotiate, Saigon would refuse to stand and fight. Our first instinct was thus to build up their morale because we know that weak states with neither the will nor the means to oppose communism in the first place would be swallowed up by communism after the negotiations were over.

When London Times editor Henry Brandon asked Secretary of State Dean Rusk if the U.S. involvement in the war would result in uncontrolled escalation, Rusk replied simply: "Horse-shit." What Dean Rusk and the rest of the U.S. government also did not anticipate was the inability of Americans to have any impact on the GVN. As an unnamed analyst, who wrote the introduction to the section of the Pentagon Papers dealing with US-GVN relations from 1964-1967, observed:

In 1964 the U.S. tried to make the GVN strong, effective and stable, and it failed. When the U.S. offered more aid, GVN accepted it without improving. . . When the U.S. offered a firmer commitment to encourage them, including possible later bombing of North Vietnam, the GVN tried to pressure us to do it sooner. . . When [U.S. Ambassador Maxwell] Taylor lectured them and threatened them, the ruling generals of GVN defied him.

. . . After several changes of government in Vietnam, the U.S. could set no higher goal than GVN stability. During the period, the USG was already starting to think about doing the job ourselves if our Vietnamese ally did not perform. By January 1964, President Johnson ruled out further debate about the merits of underwriting the GVN when he decided that
Vietnam would not prove amenable to the same kind of neutralization solution President Kennedy had supported for Laos. Mr. Johnson's New Year's message to the Junta then heading the GVN thus made clear that "The United States government shares the view of your government that 'neutralization' of South Vietnam is unacceptable. As long as the communist regime in North Vietnam persists in its aggressive policy, neutralization of South Vietnam would only be another name for a communist take-over."

What President Johnson did not say, but what a growing circle of officials knew to be the case, was that the neutralization solution—and nearly any other that could be envisioned—could not work because the GVN was already too weak, and getting weaker daily, to survive a negotiated settlement. The population under GVN control was indifferent and apathetic; army morale was low and the desertion rate high. In March, the order implementing the phased withdrawal program of the Kennedy Administration was rescinded; the urgency of the situation was such that an Inter-Agency Vietnam Committee was prepared to recommend to the President that "American personnel . . . should be integrated into the Vietnamese chain of command, both military and civil. They should become direct operational components of the Vietnamese governmental structure." Washington then assumed Hanoi would negotiate out of fear of U.S. capabilities and of the costs of a prolonged war on the North. But timing was the chief problem: the GVN had to be strong enough militarily to survive a cease-fire and organized enough politically to compete with the NLF. There either had to be a favorable balance of forces when the negotiations
began, or Washington would have to create one before they ended.

America's allies feared war

Hanoi believed that any negotiated settlement would fall considerably short of what could be achieved by defeating the Americans militarily. Washington did not believe it could be defeated. In 1964 and 1965, therefore, Washington and Hanoi were telling each other they would fight to prove their point. America's allies, however, were telling Washington that a non-communist South Vietnam might not be worth a war. Under-Secretary of State George Ball agreed, and he argued that our allies did not see Vietnam as a test case of either America's counter-insurgency strategies or the value of our commitments abroad. In an October 1964 memorandum to Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, and McGeorge Bundy, Ball pointed out:

The assumption which has governed our planning with respect to South Viet-Nam has been that the United States must successfully stop the extension of Communist power into South Viet-Nam if its promises are to have credence. It is argued that failing such an effort our Allies around the world would be inclined to doubt our promises and to feel that they could no longer safely rely upon American power against Communist aggressive ambitions.

We have by our own public statements contributed to such a reaction. (See, for example, Attorney General Kennedy's comment in Germany that if Americans did not stop Communism in South Viet-Nam, how could people believe that they would stop it in Berlin?)
Against these concerns one must balance the view of many of our Allies that we are engaged in a fruitless struggle in South Viet-Nam—a struggle we are bound to lose.

They fear that as we become too deeply involved in a war on the land mass of Asia, we will tend to lose interest in their problems. They believe that we would be foolish to risk bogging ourselves down in the Indochina jungle. They fear a general loss of confidence in American judgment that could result if we pursued a course which many regard as neither prudent nor necessary.

What we might gain by establishing the steadfastness of our commitments we could lose by an erosion of confidence in our judgment.

Ball concluded that: "We cannot assume that an escalation of the war in South Viet-Nam involving a more profound American engagement would be universally applauded by our friends and Allies or that it would necessarily operate to increase our prestige or the confidence placed in us." Mr. Ball also did not think that escalating the war "would necessarily result in a more favorable political solution than a negotiation that was not preceded by such pressure."

What disturbed President Johnson most was that while Ball might be right, Hanoi's aggressive actions against South Vietnam gave the U.S. no choice but to increase military pressure in order to protect American lives and get negotiations at all. Aides to the President later told me in interviews that Mr. Johnson realized that using force to compel the North Vietnamese
to negotiate would only encourage them to continue fighting while negotiating. But even should negotiations begin, the President realized, Hanoi would use them only to win American concessions and not to reach a compromise settlement. Consequently, the President said, he would only talk to the North Vietnamese when he was sure they had something to say.

Almost from the start the President discovered he could not follow his own instincts. U.S. allies believed it crucial that Washington and Hanoi negotiate out their differences. UN Secretary-General U. Thant, for example, thought that Hanoi and Washington equally misunderstood the other's resolve and that each perceived it was the action of the other that left them with no choice but to fight rather than negotiate. In October 1964, U. Thant sought to arrange secret talks between the two governments. Hanoi agreed in November, but no response was received from Washington for over five months. When an answer was finally given, it was negative: UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson told U. Thant that Washington had been assured that Hanoi was not interested in even secret talks. A year later, U. Thant told President Johnson of his dismay that the initiative had not been followed. But the President had not even heard of Ho's offer or U. Thant's efforts to arrange secret talks! The details of U. Thant's efforts were released by Stevenson shortly before his death in an interview with CBS news commentator Eric Sevareid. Both Stevenson and Sevareid believed that the Johnson Administration had let an opportunity for peace "slip by."

Hanoi later denied that it had told U. Thant it was willing to
engage in secret talks at all. And this was the first time Hanoi used the whipsaw technique of bargaining: one North Vietnamese official would tell one intermediary something that another North Vietnamese official would contradict. While U. Thant and others pressed the case for negotiations and assured American officials that Hanoi was ready for talks, J. Blair Seaborn, head of the Canadian delegation to the International Control Commission (ICC), made five trips to Hanoi between June 1964 and June 1965, and reported just the reverse. The channel he established between President Johnson and DRV Premier Pham Van Dong remained opened for nearly a year, and directly contradicted what U. Thant had told Stevenson that October.

Seaborn was to tell Pham Van Dong that the U.S. had limited objectives in Vietnam. The American commitment was to the independence and territorial integrity of South Vietnam so that the people there could freely and peacefully choose their form of government. U.S. military activities in Vietnam were not aimed at North Vietnam, but at assisting a duly-constituted government respond to a threat from forces of another government violating a demilitarized zone established by international agreement. Seaborn was also instructed to say that Washington believed Hanoi controlled the military operations of the NLF, as evidenced by the nearly complete cease-fires that had occurred on Hanoi's orders at Tet (the lunar new year holiday) in 1963 and 1964. Washington, consequently, wanted Hanoi to cease and desist in its military support to the NLF. If Hanoi chose to persist, Seaborn was instructed to say that President Johnson's patience
was wearing very thin and that he would stand up to aggression. "In the event of escalation," Seaborn told Premier Pham Van Dong, "the greatest devastation would ... result from the DRVN itself as a result of the air and naval activities that would be taken against North Vietnam." These themes were repeated during Seaborn's second visit to Hanoi in August 1964, where he was instructed to warn Pham Van Dong that the Tonkin Gulf resolution should serve as a warning that the U.S. could be provoked into war.

Seaborn was also to convey Washington's willingness to endorse a political settlement if Hanoi ceased supporting the NLF's armed struggle. Washington's negotiating offer to Pham Van Dong included: obtaining Saigon's agreement to a resumption of North-South trade, providing PL480 food aid directly to the DRV, lifting all foreign assets controls on the DRV currency held in the U.S., reducing all trade restrictions to only those in effect for the Soviet Union, diplomatic recognition, the removal of all U.S. forces from South Vietnam except for the 350 advisors permitted under the Geneva Agreement, and a GVN announcement of amnesty for all members of the NLF. Washington also offered Hanoi the choice of announcing all of these U.S. concessions at once, or over a three-month period.

Viewed against the background of South Vietnam's political instability and the weakness of its army, U.S. government experts on Vietnam warned that if Hanoi accepted these concessions, communism would triumph in a matter of months. As one put it, "The NLF would not have to fire a single shot. Saigon politicians
would do the job." But the President was convinced that if the South Vietnamese were left alone and American economic aid continued, the GVN would remain an independent and noncommunist government.

Pham Van Dong did not reject Washington's offer outright, but did so by countering that the following was the only basis on which war could be avoided: since the Geneva Accords had stipulated that Vietnam would be free of all foreign military forces, the U.S. was an aggressor. The NLF were engaged in a legitimate defense of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Vietnam. To avoid war, therefore, the Americans must leave Vietnam and end all support to the Saigon government. There was, Pham was telling Seaborn, nothing to negotiate about.

And then there was war

One U.S. policy-maker recalled: "After 125 Americans were wounded in the attack on Pleiku, I knew we were into something big and something that would get much bigger. It was war." The February 1965 raid on the American advisors barracks at Pleiku resulted in a decisive change in Washington's attitude toward the conflict. Until the attack, it had been possible for the President's advisors to press the case for not going to war over Vietnam. As one advisor later wrote in The Washington Post of McGeorge Bundy's fact-finding trip to Vietnam in February 1965:

... after Bundy had been in Vietnam for several days, "getting out" still seemed to be possible. The chances were admittedly thin, but in the light of what
Bundy had seen at first-hand, Johnson might just be convinced that America's interests would best be served by cutting loose as expeditiously and gracefully as possible—if the Communists laid low, at least as far as American personnel were concerned. Sunday, February 7 . . . promised to be a relaxed day. The Vietnamese New Year had not yet ended and it seemed peaceful enough for Bundy to pay a visit to the countryside . . . We would leave the next morning for Anchorage where we would spend a day writing the final report. . . . [but] on that Sunday 10 years ago started the largest war in American history. Early that morning two hundred miles from Saigon in the town of Pleiku, a platoon of Viet Cong soldiers attacked an American airfield; eight American soldiers were killed, 125 wounded. 12

The Pleiku incident meant that while diplomatic efforts would continue, the U.S. would no longer hesitate to use military force. U.S. dependents were evacuated from South Vietnam, and a series of reprisal air strikes over North Vietnam were conducted. It was at this time that plans were also made to land the first American combat troops in Vietnam. Between October 1964 and February 1965, the U.S. officials I interviewed thought they could still choose between supporting Saigon or keeping out of an internal conflict. After Pleiku, President Johnson said the communists deprived the country of that choice.

Hanoi was not unprepared for American aerial attacks on its homeland and viewed them not as reprisals for actions taken
against U.S. forces in South Vietnam, but as the beginning of a
total war. As U.S. officials were to shortly learn, "From the
start of the U.S. air offensive... Hanoi... disbelieved pro-
testations by the United States that the threat was a limited
one in terms of targets and political objectives. Not only
Hanoi's reporting and propaganda but also its actions indicated
that it expected the United States to proceed to massive attacks
on economic and population targets. Taken together, these ac-
tions added up to an urgent, comprehensive, and determined crash
program to prepare the country for unrestricted air attack and
possible ground invasion, and for a war of indefinite duration."13
Thus, from the very start, the message Washington wanted Hanoi
to get--i.e., that if it stopped its terrorist attacks on Amer-
icans (and, later, also ceased infiltration), the bombing would
stop--was not getting through. Regardless of what its forces
in the South did, Hanoi expected a war with the United States,
and the bombing simply confirmed that this had begun.

Intelligence experts consequently were, from the outset,
not sanguine that increased U.S. military pressure would weaken
Hanoi's will to fight or persuade the North Vietnamese to negotiate.
A month after the bombing of North Vietnam had begun, for exam-
ple, the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) noted that the
bombing was not having an appreciable effect on North Vietnamese
support to the NLF and that its continuation might encourage
Moscow and Peking to increase military assistance to the DRV.
Concerning the increased role of U.S. ground forces in the
actual combat, the DCI warned: ". . . we will find ourselves
mired down in combat in the jungle in a military effort we cannot win, and from which we will have extreme difficulty in extracting ourselves." Civilian officials in the Defense Department agreed, as did air force generals faced with the job of carrying out the air war. As one put it in an interview, "bombing doesn't work that way. You've got to hit the enemy hard the first time and carry through until there is a willingness to talk. If you turn the pressure on and off, the enemy can recover. He won't negotiate." The general was right.
Once the U.S. was actually in the war, a negotiated settlement became less, not more, likely. Once in the war, U.S. officials believed it could be won and U.S. terms for a negotiated settlement stiffened. State Department and White House officials involved in the effort to start negotiations warned diplomats in touch with North Vietnamese that, if Hanoi continued to spurn all attempts to start talks, continued to reject all settlement offers, and continued to demand what amounted to American capitulation, then the war might have to be fought until a weakened communist movement no longer threatened Saigon's survival. Then, these officials pointed out, Hanoi would be forced to settle on far less favorable terms than it was currently being offered.

To defense Department officials, in contrast, fighting the war for the GVN provided an interim solution to the thorny problem presented by instability and ineffectiveness of Saigon. As Deputy Secretary of Defense John T. McNaughton put it: "Action against North Vietnam is to some extent a substitute for strengthening the government in South Vietnam. That is, a less active VC (on orders from DRV) can be handled by a less efficient GVN (which we expect to have)." Indeed, most U.S. officials I have interviewed recognized that once in the war, Washington was there to stay until military developments persuaded Hanoi to "cease and desist" (the preferred goal) or, at a minimum, to enter talks with Washington about ceasing and desisting. As one
official later told me, "The President and most of us quickly found that we had little trouble in finding reasons to keep the war going. We rapidly discovered that limited military pressure on Hanoi was not having any impact on their attitude toward negotiating. We could not cut our losses and get out because we had too much already sunk into the investment. If we called it quits, the American people would wonder about our wisdom and our allies would begin to doubt the credibility of our commitments to them."

Once at war, Washington's strategy for terminating it depended on success on the battlefield. Achieving a "position of strength" became an essential prerequisite for negotiations in President Johnson's mind. The President quickly realized that such a position of strength probably could not be achieved in the short term (i.e., by 1968) by strengthening the GVN. Thus, it was essential to constantly increase military pressure on North Vietnam and compel Hanoi to negotiate. The North Vietnamese leadership, however, chose not to negotiate because they were convinced the U.S. could not win the war as long as the NVA could choose the time and place of the major battles, that Saigon would not make the internal reforms necessary to compete with the NLF, and that U.S. and world public opinion would force the U.S. to end the bombing of North Vietnam in return for the promise of negotiations.

When a basis for negotiation was proposed by the U.S. or suggested by an intermediary, consequently, Hanoi assessed the offer not according to its practability or fairness (i.e., how we wanted Hanoi to behave), but in terms of whether the situation on the
battlefield permitted the offer to be rejected. The dynamics of the war thus required the U.S. to appear as ruthless as Hanoi in order for our threats to work and so that Hanoi would not misinterpret our search for a negotiated settlement as a sign of weakness. Instead, we behaved in a manner consistent with our image of ourselves as a mature, peace-loving world power and North Vietnam behaved precisely as we expected: as a nation of fanatics intent on war at all costs. Hanoi refused to negotiate because it was weak, while the U.S. did not compel Hanoi to negotiate by a given time because we believed we were strong. But for Washington, the longer negotiations were delayed the more the impact of its threats on Hanoi diminished and the more politically necessary a negotiated settlement became.

The search for negotiations with Hanoi between 1965 and 1968 is thus one of the most fruitless chapters in U.S. diplomacy. White House sources estimated that as many as 2,000 individual efforts were made to initiate talks. On 432 of the 800-odd days of the air war against North Vietnam, U.S. planes were either restricted in their targets or completely prohibited from bombing in the hope of encouraging a favorable North Vietnamese response to a negotiating initiative. In his memoirs, Lyndon Johnson noted that there were some seventy-two negotiation initiatives he personally followed. He regarded those listed in Table 1 as the most significant:
### Table 1. President Lyndon Johnson's Assessment of the Major Initiatives in the Search for Negotiations with Hanoi, 1964-1968

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Mr. Johnson's Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 1964-June 1965</td>
<td>Seaborn missions.</td>
<td>Hanoi showed no interest in discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1965</td>
<td>Five-day bombing pause (Project Mayflower).</td>
<td>Hanoi called the pause a &quot;trick.&quot; Just after the pause ended, North Vietnamese officials approached the French and discussed Hanoi's position on a peace settlement. French officials said this could &quot;not be regarded as a valid offer of negotiations.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August-September</td>
<td>An unofficial U.S. representative met with Mai Van Bo in Paris.</td>
<td>Hanoi was unresponsive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November, 1965</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 1966</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 December 1965-30 January 1966</td>
<td>Thirty-seven day bombing pause.</td>
<td>Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in Hanoi called our peace effort a &quot;campaign of lies.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March and June 1966</td>
<td>Ronning missions.</td>
<td>Hanoi authorities were totally negative with regard to any response on their part to a halt in the bombing. Hanoi repeated its insistence on its four points.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June-December 1966</td>
<td>The Government of Poland extends good offices to arrange direct talks (Project Marigold).</td>
<td>On December 13 the Poles informed the United States that Hanoi was not willing to have talks, and on December 15 the Poles terminated conversations on the possibility of direct talks, allegedly at Hanoi's insistence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Mr. Johnson's Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1966-February 1968</td>
<td>The government of Rumania extends good offices to report Hanoi's attitude toward talks.</td>
<td>Hanoi's response was negative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-13 February 1967</td>
<td>Wilson-Kosygin talks on extending the Tet bombing pause.</td>
<td>Hanoi called the pause another &quot;trick.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July-October 1967</td>
<td>Four French friends of Henry Kissinger travelled to Hanoi to present what later became known as the San Antonio formula: The U.S. would stop bombing when this would promptly lead to productive negotiations.</td>
<td>Hanoi gave final rejection in mid-October and increased offensive actions in Vietnam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"As I look back," Mr. Johnson observed of these efforts to start negotiations, "I think that we perhaps tried too hard to spell out our honest desire for peace. . . . These numerous appeals through so many channels may well have convinced the North Vietnamese that we wanted peace at any price." Mr. Johnson was, in fact, pessimistic about a negotiated settlement from the start, believing that Hanoi would seek negotiations only to end the bombing and not the war. Mr. Johnson's characterizations of the search for negotiations are thus based on an increasingly embittering experience. As this account will show, Mr. Johnson had a fundamentally sound understanding of how Hanoi approached the war and negotiations. What Mr. Johnson failed to grasp, however, was that U.S. goals could be achieved neither by fighting nor by negotiating.

What follows is a year-by-year account of these most significant efforts between 1965 and 1967 to start negotiations between Washington and Hanoi on ending the war. The who, what, when, and how of each initiative is examined. I have also tried to explain why a particular initiative was made and what the consequences of its collapse were by drawing from interviews with those directly involved. My chief purpose has not been to provide a complete recounting of the diplomacy of the period, but to highlight what Washington and Hanoi learned about negotiating while fighting and why President Johnson ultimately came to believe that the search for negotiations prolonged the war.
1965: The failure of the bombing

What the U.S. sought in Vietnam, President Johnson declared in an April 1965 landmark speech at Johns Hopkins University, was "an independent South Viet-Nam--securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others--free from outside interference--tied to no alliance--a military base for no other country." Such a settlement, the President said, could be achieved in many ways and the U.S. was ready for "unconditional discussions" with Hanoi to that end. But, from the start, administration officials did not know how negotiations could lead to the settlement the President had described. Hanoi offered Washington terms that were not subject to negotiation. Hanoi repeatedly told Washington that before there could even be talks the bombing had to stop. Washington insisted that the talks begin unconditionally, an indication of the President's unwillingness to give up the bargaining chip that he hoped to cash in for a political settlement--i.e., the bombing would end when Hanoi ceased supporting the NLF's war and the NLF agreed to shift their struggle from the military to the political arena.

Hanoi's basic position, "the four points" (see box), was presented by Premier Pham Van Dong in a speech to the DRV National Assembly on 8 April 1965. The four points represented the irreducible minimum that had to be achieved in any direct negotiations with Washington. While Washington understood this in theory, it tended, in practice, to treat the four points as maximum demands and, hence, subject to modification through either tacit bargaining or formal negotiation. Hanoi's four-point
NORTH VIETNAM'S FOUR POINTS

Presented by Premier Pham Van Dong
to the DRVN National Assembly
(April 8, 1965)

1. Recognition of the basic national rights of the Vietnamese people: peace, independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. According to the Geneva Agreements, the US Government must withdraw from South Viet Nam all US troops, military personnel and weapons of all kinds, dismantle all US military bases, then cancel its "military alliance" with Saigon. It must end its policy of intervention and aggression in South Viet Nam. According to the Geneva Agreements, the US Government must end its war acts against the North, definitely end all encroachments on the territory and sovereignty of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam.

2. Pending the peaceful reunification of Viet Nam, while Viet Nam is still temporarily divided into two zones, the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Viet Nam must be strictly respected: the two zones must refrain from joining any military alliance with foreign countries, and there must be no foreign military bases, troops, and military personnel in their respective territories.

3. The affairs of South Viet Nam are to be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves, in accordance with the programme of the South Viet Nam National Front for Liberation, without any foreign interference.

4. The peaceful reunification of Viet Nam is to be settled by the Vietnamese people in both zones, without any foreign interference.
stand, however, linked ending the war to a political settlement of the struggle over power in South Vietnam. This represented something more than a shift of the conflict from the military into the political arena. Hanoi's insistence that the political and military issues could not be separated meant, in effect, that if negotiations were to end the war, Washington had to displace the government in Saigon it was trying to save from collapse. Hanoi maintained that American intervention in 1964 and 1965 had dramatically affected the political situation in the South; i.e., the GVN was not allowed to collapse as had been expected and, thereafter, the NLF lost ground politically as well as militarily. Thus by seeking both a political and a military settlement, Hanoi sought to restore to the communist movement in the South the momentum that had been lost. This the U.S. was unprepared to do.

Washington's diplomacy, instead, aimed at providing Hanoi chances, through pauses in the bombing of North Vietnam, to back down from the four-point stand and reformulate either publicly or in secret its settlement proposals. Once Hanoi had backed down enough to make it possible for the U.S. to enter talks, the theory went, bargaining would ensue in substantive negotiations. But President Johnson never believed that those advocating negotiations understood Hanoi or were realistic in their assessment of the chances that such a unilateral initiative as stopping the bombing would actually lead to negotiations and a settlement. "If I were Ho Chi Minh," the President repeatedly told aides, "I would never negotiate."

Thus, while Mr. Johnson realized that negotiation increasingly was a domestic political necessity, he