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Nixon, Kissinger, and the Madman Strategy during Vietnam War: Using Nuclear Threats to Intimidate Hanoi and Moscow

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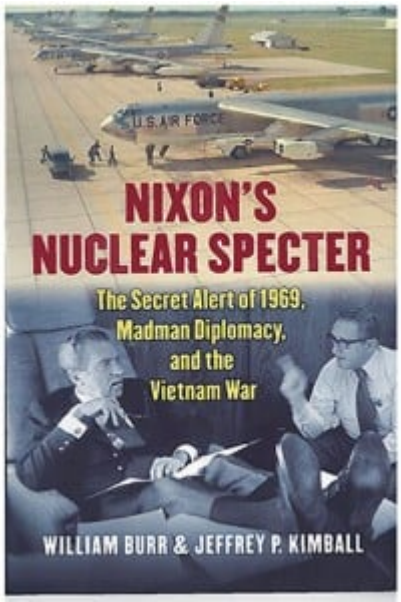
Washington, D.C. – President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger believed they could compel "the other side" to back down during crises in the Middle East and Vietnam by "push[ing] so many chips into the pot" that Nixon would seem 'crazy' enough to "go much further," according to newly declassified documents published today by the National Security Archive (www.nsarchive.gwu.edu).

The documents include a 1972 Kissinger memorandum of conversation published today for the first time in which Kissinger explains to Defense Department official Gardner Tucker that Nixon's strategy was to make "the other side … think we might be 'crazy' and might really go much further" – Nixon's Madman Theory notion of intimidating adversaries such as North Vietnam and the Soviet Union to bend them to Washington's will in diplomatic negotiations

Nixon's and Kissinger's Madman strategy during the Vietnam War included veiled nuclear threats intended to intimidate Hanoi and its patrons in Moscow. The story is recounted in a new book, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter*: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War, co-authored by Jeffrey Kimball, Miami University professor emeritus, and William Burr, who directs the Archive's Nuclear History Documentation Project. Research for the book, which uncovers the inside story of White House Vietnam policymaking during Nixon's first year in office, drew on hundreds of formerly top secret and secret records obtained by the authors as well as interviews with former government officials.



With Madman diplomacy, Nixon and Kissinger strove to end the Vietnam War on the most favorable terms possible in the shortest period of time practicable, an effort that culminated in a secret global nuclear alert in October of that year. *Nixon's Nuclear Specter* provides the most comprehensive account to date of the origins, inception, policy context, and execution of "JCS Readiness Test" – the equivalent of a worldwide nuclear alert that was intended to signal Washington's anger at Moscow's support of North Vietnam and to jar the Soviet leadership into using their leverage to induce Hanoi to make diplomatic concessions. Carried out between 13 and 30 October 1969, it involved military operations around the world, the continental United States, Western Europe, the Middle East, the Atlantic, Pacific, and the Sea of Japan. The operations included strategic bombers, tactical air, and a variety of naval operations, from movements of aircraft carriers and ballistic missile submarines to the shadowing of Soviet merchant ships heading toward Haiphong.

To unravel the intricate story of the October alert, the authors place it in the context of nuclear threat making and coercive diplomacy during the Cold War from 1945 to 1973, the culture of the Bomb, bureaucratic infighting, intra-governmental dissent, international diplomacy, domestic politics, the antiwar movement, the "nuclear taboo," Vietnamese and Soviet actions and policies, and assessments of the war's ending. The authors also recount secret military operations that were part of the lead-up to the global alert, including a top secret mining readiness test that took place during the spring and summer of 1969. This mining readiness test was a ruse intended to signal Hanoi that the US was preparing to mine Haiphong harbor and the coast of North Vietnam. It is revealed for the first time in this book.

Another revelation has to do with the fabled DUCK HOOK operation, a plan for which was initially drafted in July 1969 as a mining-only operation. It soon evolved into a mining-and-bombing, shock-and-awe plan scheduled to be launched in early November, but which Nixon aborted in October, substituting the global nuclear alert in its place. The failure of Nixon's and Kissinger's 1969 Madman diplomacy marked a turning point in their initial exit strategy of winning a favorable armistice agreement by the end of the year 1969. Subsequently, they would follow a so-called long-route strategy of withdrawing U.S. troops while attempting to strengthen South Vietnam's armed forces, although not necessarily counting on Saigon's long-term survival.

In researching *Nixon's Nuclear Specter*, the authors filed mandatory and Freedom of Information requests with the Defense Department and other government agencies and examined documents in diverse U.S. government archives as well as international sources. Today's posting highlights some of the U.S. documents, many published for the first time:

- A March 1969 memorandum from Nixon to Kissinger about the need to make the Soviets see risks in not helping Washington in the Vietnam negotiations: "we must worry the Soviets about the possibility that we are losing our patience and may get out of control."
- The Navy's plan in April 1969 for a mine readiness test designed to create a "state of indecision" among the North Vietnam leadership whether Washington intended to launch mining operations.
- Kissinger's statement to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin in May 1969

that Nixon was so flexible about the Vietnam War outcome that he was "was prepared to accept any political system in South Vietnam, provided there is a fairly reasonable interval between conclusion of an agreement and [the establishment of] such a system."

- The top secret warning to the North Vietnamese leadership that Nixon sent through an intermediary Jean Sainteny: If a diplomatic solution to the war is not reached by 1 November, Nixon would "regretfully find himself obliged to have recourse to measures of great consequence and force. . . . He will resort to any means necessary."
- The Navy's plan for mining Haiphong Harbor, code-named DUCK HOOK, prepared secretly for Nixon and Kissinger in July 1969.

The cover page to the Navy's Duck Hook plan for mining Haiphong Harbor, developed in July 1969 at the request of President Nixon and national security adviser Kissinger.

A telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Manila reporting on the discovery of the mining readiness test by two Senate investigators, including former (and future) Washington Post reporter Walter Pincus. After learning about aircraft carrier mining drills in Subic Bay (the Philippines), the investigators worried about a possible escalation recalling that Nixon had made such threats during the 1968 campaign.

- A report from September 1969 on prospective military operations against North Vietnam (referred to unofficially within the White House as DUCK HOOK) included two options to use tactical nuclear weapons: one for "the clean nuclear interdiction of three NVN-Laos passes"-the use of small yield, low fall-out weapons to disrupt traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail. The other was for the "nuclear interdiction of

two NVN-CPR [Chinese People's Republic] railroads"-presumably using nuclear weapons to destroy railroad tracks linking North Vietnam and China.

- A Kissinger telephone conversation transcript, in which Nixon worried that with the 1 November deadline approaching and major anti-Vietnam war demonstrations scheduled for 15 October and 15 November, escalating the war might produce "horrible results" by the buildup of "a massive adverse reaction" among demonstrators.
- As part of the White House plan for special military measures to get Moscow's attention, an October 1969 memorandum from the Joint Staff based on a request from Kissinger for an "integrated plan of military actions to demonstrate convincingly to the Soviet Union that the United States is getting ready for any eventuality on or about 1 November 1969." .
- A Department of Defense plan for readiness actions that included measures to "enhance SIOP [Single Integrated Operational Plan] Naval Forces" in the Pacific and for the Strategic Air Command to fly nuclear-armed airborne alert flights over the Arctic Circle.
- Navy messages on the 7th Fleet's secret shadowing of Soviet merchant ships heading toward Haiphong Harbor

The thematic focus of Nixon's Nuclear Specter is Madman Theory threat making, which culminated in the secret, global nuclear alert. But as the Kissinger statement to Dobrynin cited above suggested, a core element in Nixon's and Kissinger's overall Vietnam War strategy and diplomacy was the concept of a "decent interval" between the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Vietnam and the possible collapse or defeat of the Saigon regime. In private conversations Kissinger routinely used phrases such as "decent interval," "healthy interval," "reasonable interval," and "suitable interval" as code for a war-exiting scenario by which the period of time would be sufficiently long that when the fall of Saigon came-if it came-it would serve to mask the role that U.S. policy had played in South Vietnam's collapse.

In 1969, the Nixon's administrations long-term goal was to provide President Nguyen Van Thieus government in Saigon with a decent chance of surviving for a reasonable interval of two to five years following the sought-after mutual exit of US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. They would have preferred that President Thieu and South Vietnam survive indefinitely, and they would do what they could to maintain South Vietnam as a separate political entity. But they were realistic enough to appreciate that such a goal was unlikely and beyond their power to achieve by a military victory on the ground or from the air in Vietnam.

Giving Thieu a decent chance to survive, even for just a decent interval, however, rested primarily on persuading Hanoi to withdraw its troops from the South or, if that failed, prolonging the war in order to give time for Vietnamization to take hold in order to enable Thieu to fight the war on his own for a reasonable period of time after the US exited Indochina. In 1969, Nixon and Kissinger hoped that their Madman threat strategy, coupled with linkage diplomacy, could persuade Hanoi to agree to mutual withdrawal at the negotiating table or lever Moscows cooperation in persuading Hanoi to do so. In this respect, *Nixon's Nuclear Specter* is an attempt to contribute to better understanding of Nixon and Kissinger's Vietnam diplomacy as a whole.

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THE DOCUMENTS

Document 1A-B: Eisenhower on How the U.S. Ended the Korean War

Document A. Lt. General A. J. Goodpaster, " Memorandum of Meeting with the President 17 February 1965," 17 February 1965, Top Secret

Document B. Memo, Benjamin Read to Dean Rusk, subj: Threat of the Use of Nuclear Weapons Against China in Korean War, 4 March 1965, Top Secret

Sources:

A: Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, Meeting Notes File, box 1, "[February 17, 1965-10:00AM Meeting with General Eisenhower and Others,]";

B: National Archives and Records Administration, Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59 [RG 59], Formerly Top Secret Foreign Policy Files, 1964-1966, box 5, Def 12 US.

Nixon's Madman Theory—the principle of threatening excessive or extraordinary force—had its origins the brinkmanship of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, under whom Nixon had served as vice president, and Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles. Claims about how nuclear diplomacy had brought the Korean War to an end against an obstinate Chinese foe became part of Republican Party lore and eventually the conventional wisdom in the United States. Nixon, in particular, would take the lesson to heart.

In 1955 Admiral C. Turner Joy contended that the Communist side had made concessions at the negotiating table in response to the Eisenhower government's nuclear threats against China in May of 1953. In 1956, *Life*, the mass-market magazine, published a supporting story in which Secretary of State Dulles claimed to have delivered an unmistakable and effective nuclear warning to Beijing on Eisenhower's behalf in 1953. As the story goes, when Dulles traveled to New Delhi, India in May, he told Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru that if the armistice negotiations failed the United States "would probably make stronger . . . military exertions and that this might well extend the conflict," and if the fighting became more intense, "it is difficult to know what [the] end might be." To underline this veiled threat, Washington apparently sent secret messages to Beijing through other intermediaries to the effect that failure to reach an armistice would lead Washington to remove constraints on types of weapons and targets.

On 17 February 1965, almost a decade later, Eisenhower repeated the story about the Dulles-Nehru meeting to then President Lyndon B. Johnson, who had invited him to the

White House to hear his "thinking concerning the situation in South Vietnam." As summarized by State Department Executive Secretary Benjamin H. Read, Eisenhower told Johnson and the others in attendance that "he had sent a message to Nehru in 1953, warning that we would use nuclear weapons against China if the Korean War continued, and that he believed this warning played a decisive part in terminating the Korean War."

Secretary of State Rusk—probably at Johnson's or McGeorge Bundy's request—tasked Read to investigate the claim. But Read and his staff could "find no documentary support in such specific terms," except for "messages which indicate that certain signals were passed both to Nehru and to [Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav] Molotov, which could conceivably have been so interpreted." According to Dulles' notes, he had told Nehru in New Delhi on 21 May 1953 that if the armistice negotiations failed, the "U.S. would probably make stronger, rather than lesser, military exertion and that this might well extend area conflict (I [Secretary Dulles] assumed this would be relayed to Chinese)."

Even if Molotov or Nehru told Chinese leaders about the Eisenhower administration's signals and interpreted them in the way the administration wanted them to be understood, the warnings were probably not critically important in ending the war. Other considerations were far more relevant to Mao Zedong's decisions. Nevertheless, Eisenhower's belief that his threats were relevant had an impact on the thinking of his vice president, Richard M. Nixon, who believed that threats could change the conduct of adversaries.

Document 2: Memorandum from Al Haig to Henry Kissinger, "Memorandum from Secretary Laird Enclosing Preliminary Draft of Potential Military Actions re Vietnam," 2 March 1969, enclosing a memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to Kissinger, 21 February 1969, and report [excerpts] from Joint Staff, Top Secret/Sensitive, with Kissinger's Memo Reply to Laird, 3 March 1969, Top Secret

Source: NSCF, box 1007, Haig Vietnam Files, Vol. 1 (Jan – March 1969)

From the first weeks of 1969 through much of the rest of the year, Nixon and Kissinger considered how they could apply "maximum pressure" on North Vietnam and the VC/NLF in South Vietnam, which would have the goal of altering the military situation in their favor, enable them to bargain from a position of strength, and persuade the other side to concede key terms to the U.S. and RVN in negotiations.

The subject of military pressure came up early in the new administration at a 27 January late luncheon meeting in the Pentagon between the president, Kissinger, JCS Chairman General Earl Wheeler, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. During the discussion, someone—probably Nixon or Kissinger—brought up "the possibility of working out a program of potential military actions which might jar the North Vietnamese into being more forthcoming at the Paris talks." The Joint Staff of the JCS soon set about the task of preparing a set of "*indicator actions*" designed "to create fear in the Hanoi leadership that the United States is preparing to undertake new highly damaging military actions against North Vietnamese territory, installations, and interests."

On 21 February, Laird sent a "working copy" of the Joint Staff's proposed "dramatic steps," which could take the form of either actual or feigned operations—"each developed over an adequate period of time to be picked up by the communists":

1. A combined airborne/amphibious operation against several objectives in NVN.

2. Punitive airborne/airmobile expeditions against enemy lines of communications (LOC) and base areas in Laos and Cambodia.
3. Renewed and expanded air and naval operations against NVN to include closure of Haiphong and the blockade of NVN.
4. Subversion of the population and preparation for active resistance by the people against the Hanoi regime.
5. A *technical* escalation.

Each of the proposed military measures was "keyed" to political and diplomatic maneuvers designed to increase the potential for a jarring impact. The proposal for a "technical escalation," the most startling of them all, amounted to a threat to use atomic and/or biological or chemical weapons and included a "visit" by chemical-biological-radiological weapons experts to the Far East. Haig's paraphrase of that option, however, focused on a *nuclear* escalation: "A plan for actual or feigned technical escalation or war against [the] North (nuclear)." The visit by weapons experts would be accompanied by political moves such as a U.S. diplomatic "hint" of a "possible technical escalation of the war" and a statement by a senior military official that the "Pentagon periodically examines moves by which new and more modern weapons" could be introduced into the Vietnam conflict.

Laird dutifully passed on the Joint Staff's proposals to Kissinger, but he disassociated himself from them in his cover memorandum. Not only was this paper "preliminary," but General Wheeler and other members of the Joint Chiefs had not reviewed it; nor had Laird's staff. Laird suggested his own skepticism when he wrote that "I must confess to you being more impressed . . . with the potential disadvantages of the proposals than with the possibility of achieving movement in Paris by such means.

Document 3: Henry A. Kissinger to the President, Subj: Vietnam Papers, 22 March 1969, with memorandum from Kissinger to the President, subj: Vietnam Situation and Options, [3/20] attached, Top Secret

Source: Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Morton A. Halperin Papers, box 10, Vietnam

In this wide ranging discussion of Vietnam strategy, probably drafted by NSC staffer Morton Halperin, the central role of the Soviet Union in White House thinking about a diplomatic solution to the war is evident, and so are ideas closely related to linkage and the Madman Theory. According to Kissinger/Halperin, "There is no question that the Soviets could play a major role in bringing the war to an end if they decide to put pressure on Hanoi." To accomplish that, it was necessary to "change the current Soviet calculation of gains and risks" associated with pressuring their Vietnamese allies. One way to do that would be for the Soviets to see risks in not helping Washington: "Within Vietnam we must worry the Soviets about the possibility that we are losing our patience and may get out of control." Escalatory measures might be "considered in this light."

Document 4: Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to Dr. Henry Kissinger, 11 April 1969, enclosing memorandum to Laird from JCS Chairman Wheeler, 11 April 1969, and paper, subj: Plan for a Mining Feint of Haiphong Harbor, n.d., Top Secret

Source: Department of Defense MDR Release

Disappointed by the lack of substantive movement in the Paris negotiations and Moscow's

unwillingness or inability to persuade Hanoi to compromise on U.S. terms, Nixon and Kissinger initiated another secret military scheme in hopes of levering Moscow's cooperation or Hanoi's acquiescence; that is, one beyond the secret bombing of enemy base areas in Cambodia, which had been launched in March. On Kissinger's suggestion, Nixon ordered the U.S. Navy to carry out mine-laying exercises in the Philippines and the Tonkin Gulf, hoping this ruse would lead Hanoi to believe that the Washington was preparing to mine and blockade Haiphong and other coastal ports along the South China Sea, thus driving them to enter into high-level negotiations.

Secretary Laird forwarded the plan that Kissinger had wanted and had been working on with Navy personnel, led by Captain Rembrandt Robinson, one of the JCS Chairman's liaison officers at the White House. In the spirit of the "indicator actions," the plan was designed to create a "state of indecision" in the North Vietnamese leadership by "creat[ing] the impression" that Washington was preparing to launch mining operations against North Vietnam. The mining feint plan included detailed step by step "sequential actions" beginning with an inventory of Pacific Command mining assets in Step 1. JCS Chairman Wheeler gave it a tepid endorsement, while Laird wrote that he had "serious reservations." Nevertheless, Nixon and Kissinger insisted that the plan go forward because they wanted to find ways to induce the North Vietnamese leadership to acquiesce in U.S. diplomacy.

Document 5: Message from Commander Task Force 7 to Commander Task Force 7.4, Subj: Mine Warfare Readiness, 13 May 1969, Secret

Source: U.S. Navy History and Archives Division, Seventh Fleet Records, box 117, Misc. May 1969

Consistent with the "mining feint" approved by the White House in April 1969, the Seventh Fleet began mining exercises–"mine delivery training"–in Subic Bay, in the Philippines. One of the first such exercises involved the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. A-6 and A-7 aircraft stationed on the *Enterprise* would conduct mining runs in specially designated areas of Subic Bay so they could "practice military tactics."

Document 6: Memorandum of Conversation, Kissinger and Dobrynin, 14 May 1969, [excerpts] *Soviet-American Relations: The Détente Years, 1969-1972*, ed. David C. Geyer, Douglas E. Selvage, and Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC, 2007), doc. 22, pp. 59-62

During his secret meetings with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, Kissinger began putting across the concept of a "decent interval" as part of the Nixon White House's long-term diplomatic strategy. For example, just before Nixon gave a major speech on Vietnam policy, on 14 May 1969, Kissinger told Dobrynin that "Nixon is even prepared to accept any political system in South Vietnam, 'provided there is a fairly *reasonable interval* between conclusion of an agreement and [the establishment of] such a system.'"

Document 7: Letters, Admiral Moorer to Laird, 21 July 1969, and Laird to Kissinger, n.d. enclosing: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, DUCK HOOK, 20 July 1969, Top Secret

Source: MDR release

The failure of the mining feint to intimidate North Vietnam led Nixon and Kissinger to consider the launching of an actual mining operation against Haiphong. In response to White House requests, senior Navy officers, including White House liaison officer Captain

Rembrandt Robinson prepared a mining plan, code-named DUCK HOOK. (A separate plan provided for the blockade of Sihanoukville, Cambodia, to keep supplies from reaching guerillas in the South). Although Kissinger wanted to keep the Defense Department, especially Secretary of Defense Laird, out of the picture, military protocol dictated otherwise, and it was Laird who handed off the plan to Kissinger.

The detailed 50-page document was divided into a summary, an intelligence appraisal, mining plan concepts and options, rules of engagement, an optimistic assessment of potential world reactions, and implications for international law (no problem, according to the Navy planners). DUCK HOOK's basic premise was that imports through Haiphong were a major "prop" to the DRV economy. The closing of the Haiphong port complex, the authors argued, "will have a major effect on the North Vietnam economy and the ability of the North Vietnamese to support the war in the south." The mining operation against Hanoi included three options. Option Alfa involved three aircraft carriers, Bravo two, and Charlie one. With each option, the purpose was to block large merchant ships from access to Haiphong Harbor as well as to "disrupt" any attempts by Hanoi to use smaller, lighterage craft to offload merchant ships anchored past the minefields.

During the following months, the character of the DUCK HOOK planning would change as Kissinger and his aides decided that mining by itself would not be enough. By early October 1969 DUCK HOOK would include options for bombing of urban and industrial targets in North Vietnam.

Document 8: Jean Sainteny, Memorandum for President Nixon, n.d., with cover memorandum by Tony Lake, July 16, 1969, Top Secret

Source: Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library [RPNL], Henry A. Kissinger Office File, box 106, folder: Mister "S," Vol. 1 (1 of 2).

DDUCK HOOK was accompanied by dire threats communicated by Nixon and Kissinger directly and indirectly, warning Hanoi that unless they responded positively to US negotiating demands by November 1, "measures of great consequence and force" would be taken against North Vietnam.

On Kissinger's recommendation, and consistent with their post-*Sequoia* intention to escalate threat making, President Nixon met with Jean Sainteny on 15 July to ask him to undertake a mission to Hanoi. An essential task for Sainteny was to deliver an *unwritten* warning from Nixon, which incorporated an indirect reference to the mining and blockading operation Nixon and Kissinger were then considering:

He has decided to hope for a positive outcome from the conversations at Paris by 1 November, and he is prepared to show good will by some humanitarian gestures, which Mr. Kissinger will be prepared to discuss in detail. But if, however, by this date—the anniversary of the [Johnson] bombing halt—no valid solution has been reached, he will regretfully find himself obliged to have recourse to *measures of great consequence and force. . . . He will resort to any means necessary.*

Document 9: U.S. Embassy Philippines telegram 8452 to State Department, subj: Pincus/Paul Visit, 8 August 1969, Top Secret, excised copy

Source: Defense Department MDR release

Walter Pincus, a former (and future) *Washington Post* reporter, and Norman Paul, a Washington DC lawyer, created a flap when they learned about the mining readiness test. In early August 1969 they were looking into U.S. military activities in the western Pacific at the direction of Senator Stuart Symington (D-Mo), chairman of the National Security Commitments Abroad, a subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations. While in Japan, they learned about the shipment of 1,000 mines to Subic Bay. Pursuing the matter at Subic, they found that the chief of the naval magazine was unable to explain the purpose of the shipment or why the mine inventory was larger than usual. On visiting the *USS Oriskany*, Paul learned from its commanding officer that his pilots were engaged in training exercises. Asked about the nature of the training, the officer told Paul that it was an "aerial mine-laying exercise." Pincus and Paul then interviewed the captain in charge of the Mine Readiness Test Team, who explained that the Navy's Service Force Command had directed the mine shipments, that his team was at Subic to conduct an "annual inspection on a surprise basis," and, misleadingly, that the mines were in "normal configuration 'Charlie.'" He assured them that the exercise was routine: the training of the carrier crews was "not unusual" and was taking place in connection with programs for the "general improvement in mine warfare readiness."

Unconvinced, Pincus and Paul "repeatedly demonstrated" their concern to a U.S. Embassy officer about the possibility of "military actions that could increase our … level of involvement in Vietnam." As if to lend credence to their concerns, Pincus and Paul noted that during the presidential campaign Nixon had discussed the mining of North Vietnamese ports, especially Haiphong Harbor, as a means of wringing concessions from Hanoi. Soon, Pincus and Paul reported their findings and concern to Committee chairman Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Ark), who soon raised the danger of escalating the war in communications with Secretary Laird.

Besides the mining readiness issue, Pincus and Paul were investigating U.S. nuclear weapons deployments in the Philippines; hence the excisions and the "Formerly Restricted Data" classification of this message.

Document 10: Memo, Henry Kissinger to Nixon, n.d., subj: Conceptual Plan for Implementation of Operation DUCK HOOK, Top Secret

Source: NARA, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Record Group 218 [RG 218], JCS Chairman Files (Earle Wheeler), box 169, folder: White House Memos (1969)

In late July or early August, Kissinger presented Nixon with a memorandum outlining a "conceptual plan for implementation of operation DUCK HOOK," which placed the mining operation into a broader context of force, diplomacy, and politics and may have been prepared by his own staff. The operation, Kissinger began, "would not be approached as a purely military action but instead as a combined military and diplomatic operation intended to produce both military and political results with minimum adverse reactions at home and abroad."

In addition to several recommended military measures, one amounted to a nuclear readiness alert: U.S. forces would *"assume a heightened PACOM and SAC alert posture militarily to show our resolve and to respond to whatever contingencies arise."*

Documents 11A-B: Duck Hook Operational Concept

Document A. Report, "Vietnam Contingency Planning: Concept of Operations," 13 September 1969, Top Secret

Document B. Memorandum, Tony Lake to Kissinger, 17 September 1969 subj: Initial Comments on Concept of Operations, with attachment: "Vietnam Contingency Planning," 16 September 1969, Top Secret

Source:

A. RNPL, NSCF, box 74, Vietnam Subject Files, folder: Vietnam (General Files) Sep 69-Nov 69 (2 of 2);

B. RNPL, Lake Chronological Files, box 1048, folder 2

A "concept of operations" paper prepared in mid-September is a clear example of putting "all options on the table." Besides possible ground action against North Vietnam, including an amphibious operation, the planners considered nuclear-use options, perhaps the only time that Nixon White House planners put nuclear options on paper. Decision point four consisted of two elements. One incorporated "major air strikes against high value target systems," such as electric power and air defenses. The other was a "*clean nuclear interdiction of three NVN-Laos passes*." What was meant by "clean" was very likely was a nuclear weapon that did not have dirty, fallout-producing effects. The aide or aides who drafted the concept of operations—Robinson perhaps—may simply have had in mind an airburst of a low-yield tactical nuclear weapon. In any event, the concept of a so-called clean nuclear weapon was partly designed to reduce the political opprobrium of using nuclear weapons, but that was probably wishful thinking. Decision point five included another nuclear option, the "nuclear interdiction" of two railroad lines that connected North Vietnam with China; it did not specify "clean" weapons.

Presumably all of the specific decision points and proposed actions, including the nuclear use proposals, were discussed at least at one of Kissinger's meetings with this "trusted group" of aides, but the records of discussion are closed in Henry Kissinger's papers at the Library of Congress. On 17 September, however, a few days after the "Concept of Operations" paper was finalized, Anthony Lake offered his initial comments. For example, he cautioned that the initial attack would have to "be as tough as possible to gain as much psychological effect as it can" because the reception on the homefront to "each 'package' of attacks will be politically more difficult." He questioned the efficacy and wisdom of three of the proposed actions: ground incursions into North Vietnam; the bombing of dikes; and a "permissive channel" into Sihanoukville—that is, allowing only those ships with a U.S.-issued Certificate of Clearance to enter the port. Ground operations into North Vietnam, he argued, would run the risk of a Chinese response and, moreover, could not be carried out "on a scale which would pose much threat to Hanoi."

Referring to the nuclear attack recommendations, as well as on the overall operation itself, Lake raised questions that signaled danger but would also have a bearing on the strategic alert measures Nixon and Kissinger launched in mid-October:

- What would be our concurrent movements of ships to the area, our state of strategic readiness, our posture in Korea and Berlin?

- If we go as far as the interdiction measures in (4) and (5) [the nuclear

measures], what other actions would we take at this very high level of escalation once the precedent is established?

- What would we do if these actions fail?
- What counter-actions should we take in various contingencies?

By "state of *strategic* readiness" Lake meant the alert posture of U.S. nuclear forces and the extent to which they were poised to signal determination and be ready for rapid use in a crisis. By "precedent," Lake may have been referring to the first military use of nuclear weapons since 1945 with all of its implications for the "nuclear taboo" that had contributed to restrained U.S. nuclear use practices for decades.

Document 12: Message, Rear Admiral Frederic A. Bardshar to JCS Chairman Wheeler, 15 September 1969, subj: PRUNING KNIFE Status Report No. 1, Top Secret

Source: U.S. Army Military History Research Collection (USAMHRC), Carlisle Barracks PA., Creighton Abrams Papers, box: 1969-1970

On White House orders—and as members of Kissinger's staff began working on a concept for what some unofficially called DUCK HOOK—General Wheeler ordered the formation of a military "planning group" composed of members drawn from MACV, the Seventh Air Force, and the Seventh Fleet to rendezvous at the MACV compound in Saigon for the purpose of designing an operational plan for attacks against North Vietnam Their plan was supposed to be based on the White House DUCK HOOK concept of a sharp and sudden blow over a limited period of time for the purpose of mainly achieving diplomatic and political ends. But group members favored what they thought of as a "sound military concept"—that is, one designed to achieve primarily military ends. This decision put the JCS group at odds with the White House concept of an offensive that would have both military and political/diplomatic purposes. The JCS plan-in-the-making was codenamed PRUNING KNIFE.

Document 13: Telcon [Telephone Conversation Transcript], The President Mr. Kissinger 4:40 p.m. September 27[1969]

Source: RPNL, Henry Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, box 2, September 19-30, 1969; [also published in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume 6, Document 126*]

Antiwar demonstrations scheduled for mid-October and mid-November 1969 cast a pall over Nixon's planning and helped shape his decision to cancel the prospective military operation against North Vietnam. The forthcoming15 October Moratorium and the 13-15 November Moratorium and New Mobilization made Nixon worry about the signal that would be sent to Hanoi by the coincidental timing of the bombing-and-mining operation scheduled to begin soon after 1 November. In a 29 September telephone conversation with Kissinger, Nixon explained that "he doesn't want to appear to be making the tough move after the 15th just because of the rioting at home"—that is, the Moratorium. Although Nixon believed that Secretary of Defense Laird might have been right in predicting that about three months after the operation began "it will have relatively high public support," Nixon said he "would like to nip it before the first demonstration, because there will be another one on 15 November." He believed there was a possibility that the days following the launching of the military operation in early November and leading up to the second Moratorium and New

Mobe in mid November, “horrible results” might be produced by the buildup of “a massive adverse reaction” among demonstrators.

Nixon asked Kissinger whether “in his planning, he could pick this up so that we make the tough move before the 15th of October?” Kissinger answered “yes. But he cautioned that if the D-day for the operation were moved up to a time before 15 October, it would “confuse” the North Vietnamese and “look as if we tricked them.” He recommended that the president might instead consider holding a press conference or giving a television report in which he criticized the demonstrators for “dividing the country and making it impossible to settle the problem [of Vietnam] on a reasonable basis.”

Document 14: Memorandum to the President from Secretary of Defense Laird, Subj: Air and Naval Operations Against North Vietnam, 8 October 1969, with memorandum from Acting JCS Chairman Thomas Moorer to Secretary of Defense on same subject, 1 October 1969, Top Secret

Source: Department of Defense MDR release

While Nixon was making up his mind whether to escalate the war, Melvin Laird presented him with a severe critique of the Joint Chief’s PRUNING KNIFE plan which took into account both military and domestic political concerns. Kissinger later signed off on a critique of Laird’s memorandum, but the arguments in the latter very likely had an impact on Nixon. Although Laird probably never saw the most recent October DUCK HOOK plans, many of his criticisms of PRUNING KNIFE applied to them. Besides arguing that the Chiefs had failed to demonstrate that PRUNING KNIFE would produce “conclusive” or “decisive results,” Laird cited the CIA’s analysis, which pointed to a number of difficulties. For example, the plans for blockading North Vietnam would only produce a “temporary” disruption; and that Hanoi could sustain its economy by “drawing down present reserves and maintaining present imports overland.” Moreover, a mining-bombing campaign carried potentially “significant liabilities”; foreign ships could be damaged or sunk and “create new risks of a Soviet-U.S. confrontation.” If Hanoi became more dependent on Chinese supply lines, that could strengthen “Chinese political influence.”

Laird pointed to other problems, including the possible loss of over 100 bomber aircraft within five days; “high” civilian casualties in North Vietnam; the risk of stepped-up DRV attacks in the South; and North Vietnam’s development of “sanctuary air bases” in China for its aircraft. Moreover, Laird argued, once the campaign began, the U.S. military command might want to escalate further by requesting additional “operating authorities,” such as a quarantine or blockade of Cambodia; “ground incursions into Cambodia, Laos, and NVN”; and “B-52 raids into NVN,” which presumably would be mass-scale attacks. Sensitive to the domestic U.S. implications, Laird anticipated a “devastating” public reaction if U.S. casualties grew. In any event, “demonstrations would have to be expected” around the world and at home. This would be all the more the case if Washington could point to no “provocative” North Vietnamese action to justify an attack.

Document 15: Col. William E. Lemnitzer to JCS Chairman Wheeler, 9 October 1969, with memoranda attached (handwritten note from Leminitzer [“L”], memorandum from Robert Pursley, and Wheeler directive to Joint Staff)

Source: NARA, RG 218, JCS Chairman’s Files (Wheeler), box 109, 381 World-Wide Increased Readiness Posture (October 69)

This paper on presidential decisions to implement the alert provides evidence of the linkage between the purpose of the alert and Vietnam policy (note the 1 November reference). Haig's phone calls to the Pentagon brought the JCS into planning for the alert on 9 October. William Lemnitzer, one of the Joint Staff liaison officers to the White House and a member of the DUCK HOOK group, sent Colonel Robert Pursley's list of measures to Wheeler, telling him that the president had approved "five major actions" and that Laird had approved "execution as directed by the White House." What Kissinger wanted, Wheeler learned, was:

an integrated plan of military actions to demonstrate convincingly to the Soviet Union that the United States is getting ready for any eventuality on or about 1 November 1969. . . . . Rather than threatening a confrontation (which may or may not occur), the objective of these actions would be a demonstration of improving or confirming readiness to react should a confrontation occur.

Lemnitzer presented Wheeler with a directive authorizing the Joint Staff to prepare plans based on the approved five actions so they could be sent to the White House by the close of business, 10 October. The handwritten cover memorandum from Lemnitzer indicates that Laird had seen the memorandum and "approves Execution as directed by the White House."

Document 16: Secretary of Defense Laird, Memorandum to the President, Subj: Test of U.S. Military Readiness, 11 October 1969, Top Secret

Source: RNPL, NSCF. Box 123, Vietnam Operation Pruning Knife [2 of 2]

On the basis of earlier discussion at the Pentagon and Laird's approval, JCS Chairman Wheeler sent out messages to the various CINCS instructing them to take approved readiness measures, including stand-downs of air operations to facilitate a higher state of alert, so they would be in a position to "respond to a possible confrontation with the USSR." To avoid complications, there was to be no change in the DEFCON status. The directed actions should be "discernible to the Soviets but should not be threatening." The next day Laird sent to President Nixon copies of the telegrams along with an "Outline Plan for Testing Military Readiness" and a public affairs plan.

Document 17: Memorandum from G. C. Brown, Defense Intelligence Agency, to Director, J-3 (Operations), 11 October 1969, with memorandum from Col. C.H. Change, General Operations Division (J-3) [Joint Staff], "Background Paper for the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, for a Meeting with the Secretary of Defense, subj: Impact of Exercise HIGH HEELS on Plan for Increased Readiness Posture," 13 October 1969, Top Secret, excised copy

Source: MDR release

Well before Nixon ordered the readiness test, the Defense Department had scheduled an annual strategic command post exercise, HIGH HEELS, which gave decision-makers and senior officials a chance to familiarize themselves with nuclear war plans and nuclear use procedures in a war game context. HIGH HEELs was a world-wide exercise that involved all of the military commanders-in-chiefs, at home and overseas, and planning for it was already advanced. It was this consideration which made Secretary of Defense Laird want to postpone the readiness test, but Kissinger would not hear of that. At the same time, intelligence officials were concerned that the simultaneous operation of the readiness test and HIGH HEELS could be potentially dangerous because exercise operational messages that called for nuclear weapons use in a particular contingency might be detected by the

Soviet adversary and linked to actual on-going readiness and alert operations around the world. As a Defense Intelligence Agency official put it, "an incident involving a message containing threatening material, along with Soviet observations of actual U.S. movements, radio silence, and stand-down activities, could cause a hazardous situation." Moreover, the increased volume of HIGH HEEL message traffic could cause delays in the receipt of "critical non-exercise" messages about Soviet reactions to U.S. military moves.

In light of these problems, Kissinger's objections, and Joint Chiefs of Staff recommendations, Laird agree to strip back HIGH HEELS so that it involved only officials in the Washington, D.C. area, leaving out the CINCS altogether.

Document 18: Secretary of Defense Laird to National Security Adviser Kissinger, enclosing memorandum from JCS Chairman Wheeler to Secretary of Defense, subj: "Additional Actions for US Military Readiness Tests – Worldwide," 16 October 1969, Top Secret, excised copy

Source: Department of Defense MDR release

To get Moscow's attention but without unduly worrying it, the Nixon White House wanted the Pentagon to take as many actions as possible. Consistent with this, JCS Chairman Wheeler asked the CINCs for proposals and after receiving suggestions, the Joint Staff reviewed them and prepared a master list for top officials. In his memorandum to Laird, Wheeler noted that the proposed actions "would reflect an increase in intensity of signals received by the Soviets." With the involvement of the naval, air, and other forces of eight unified and specified commands, the proposed actions would occur on a world-wide basis, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, ranging from movements of aircraft carriers in the Atlantic and of destroyers in the Gulf of Aden to SAC airborne alert and the surveillance of Soviet merchant ships heading toward Haiphong Harbor.

This same document appears in the State Department's historical series, *Foreign Relations of the United States* in the volume on national security policy, 1969-1972 (document 82). But there are interesting differences in the sections on Pacific Command and Strategic Air Command. For example: that PACOM would "enhance SIOP Naval Forces at Sea" is exempted from *FRUS*, and keeping MACE missiles on alert is excised from the release to the National Security Archive. A crucial point–that SAC B-52 airborne alert bombers would carry nuclear weapons–was withheld from the *FRUS*, but released to the Archive.

Documents 19A-B: Shadowing Soviet Merchant Ships:

Document A. Message, Comseventhflt [Commander, 7th Fleet], to CTG [Commander Task Group] 70.8, Subj: Surveillance of Sov Mership, 20 October 1969, Secret

Document B. U.S.S. Orleck, to CTG [Commander Task Group] 7.0, Subj: Surveillance of Sov Mership, 22 October 1969, Secret

Source: U.S. Navy History and Archives Division, Seventh Fleet Records, box 128, Soviet Fleet Operations October 1969

Consistent with the White House's objective of sending signals Moscow over the state of the Vietnam negotiations, a proposal to surveil Soviet ships heading toward Haiphong Harbor had been on Robert Pursley's list of possible operations for the readiness test (see document 12). For economy reasons, JCS Chairman Wheeler dropped the proposal until

Kissinger and Haig pressed to reinstate it, and it was duly included in the package of additional measures that Laird sent Kissinger on 16 October. Not all of the relevant messages are available, but Seventh Fleet archival records include the Commander's directive and a report on the successful interception and shadowing of the *Svirsk* by the *U.S.S. Orleck* on 20 October 1969. The reference to "Snoopy Video Tape" in document B is to a small helicopter-type drone used for photographic intelligence collection, in this instance, photography of the Soviet crew as it took notice of the shadowing activity.

Document 20: U.S. Strategic Air Command, *History of Strategic Air Command FY 1970*, Historical Study No. 117 (Offutt Air Force Base: Strategic Air Command, 1971), excerpt: chapter section on "Special JCS Readiness Test," Top Secret, excised copy

Source: Air Force FOIA release

This chapter excerpt provides a detailed overview of the phases of SAC nuclear operations during the readiness test: (1) the initial stand-down and higher ground alert beginning 12 October, (2) the resumption of flying activities on 18 October, (3) the return to stand-down during 25-30 October, and (4) the "Giant Lance" nuclear-armed airborne alert operation during 27-30 October.

As noted in this account, the readiness test did not include the SAC ICBM force which was always on a high state of alert; by contrast, the bomber force could more easily be alerted in order to make a "show of force."

After reviewing Wheeler's instructions to take "discernible" actions to raise the readiness of U.S. forces, the SAC historian noted that the Command received no information about the "origin or purpose" of the readiness test. Nevertheless, SAC officers speculated at the time that it was related to the Vietnam negotiations and to Nixon's forthcoming speech on 3 November speech, which had been announced on 13 October, early in the readiness test.

Documents 21A-B: Looking for Soviet Reactions

Document A. Central Intelligence Memorandum, subj: Possible Communist Reactions to US Military Readiness Tests, 27 October 1969, Top Secret, excised copy, under appeal at ISCAP

Document B. Defense Intelligence Agency, Special Intelligence Report, Summary of Soviet Reactions to US Operations, #9, 28 October 1969, Top Secret, excised copy, under appeal

Sources:

A: MDR release, under appeal at ISCAP;

B: RPNL, NSF, box 123, Vietnam – Operation Pruning Knife [2 of 2]

Early in the secret alert, Kissinger tasked the intelligence community to keep its antennae up to detect any Soviet reactions to the heightened readiness posture. As the activities began to draw to a close, the CIA prepared for Kissinger (which he initialed) a short report which listed "noteworthy Communist" military measures and the degree to which they may have been responsive to the readiness test. Because so much information in the report was derived from communications intelligence (COMINT, classified as "Top Secret Umbra"), only one activity–the reverse course by Soviet ships in the Red Sea on 21 October–has been declassified. The Soviet activities that Washington espied were then secret and how much

the intelligence community knew about them remains a secret. This document has been published in the State Department's historical series, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Document 89), but the version published here has more information: a reference to the Chinese alert and details on Soviet naval activities of 21 October.

As part of the intelligence watch, the Defense Intelligence Agency prepared regular reports on what it saw as Soviet reactions to the readiness test activities. The document dated 28 October (also initialed "HK") is representative of the series. Like the CIA memorandum, the report has been massively excised because so much of it is based on COMINT. It is worth noting that this document and others in the "Special Intelligence" series is located in the Vietnam files at the Nixon Library, further evidence of the readiness test's connection to the White House's Vietnam strategy.

So far no evidence has shown up from the Soviet side (for example, in the memoir literature: (Gromyko, Dobrynin, etc.) of awareness of the alert. Whether the Soviets even saw a connection with Vietnam or not is so far unknown and cCertainly, the alert had no impact on Moscow's Vietnam policy or on Hanoi's position in the Paris negotiations.

Document 22: Memorandum, "Kissinger," from files of Gardner Tucker, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Systems Analysis, 10 August 1972, Top Secret, excised copy

Source: Defense Department MDR release, under appeal

During the course of 1972, a secret Department of Defense panel led by Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering John S. Foster prepared a special policy review of "employment policy" for the use of nuclear weapons. The purpose was to give U.S. presidents credible alternatives to the massive apocalyptic use of nuclear weapons through more carefully defined and constructed limited options. One of the participants in Foster Panel policy review, Gardner Tucker, had a discussion with Kissinger which touched upon the Madman Theory. Few such explicit discussions have come to light so far. Distancing himself a little from Nixon, Kissinger said: the "President's strategy has been (in the mid-East crisis, in Vietnam, etc.) to 'push so many chips into the pot' that the other side will think we might be 'crazy' and might really go much further." Nevertheless, in Nixon's absence, Kissinger followed the Madman strategy during the October War (1973).

Document 23: Memorandum of Conversation, Graham Martin, Lawrence Eagleburger, W.R. Smyser, Kissinger, 19 July 1974, subj: [situation in South Vietnam]

Source: RG 59, Records of Henry Kissinger, 1973-1977, box 9: July 1974 NODIS Memcons.

The decent interval concept remained central to Kissinger's thinking about the U.S. exit from the Vietnam War after 1969. For example, on 3 August 1972, Kissinger reminded Nixon of the outcome they were aiming for: "We've got to find some [negotiated] formula that holds the thing together a year or two, after which—after a year, Mr. President, Vietnam will be a backwater. If we settle it, say, this October, by January '74 no one will give a damn" (Oval Office Conversation 760-6, Nixon and Kissinger, 3 August 1972, Nixon White House Tapes, Nixon Library). On 23 October 1972, at the time Kissinger had struck a deal with Le Duc Tho and was trying to win Thieu's approval for the agreement, Nixon told his hawkish aide Alexander Haig, who was skeptical of Kissinger's negotiations: "Call it cosmetics or whatever you want. This has got to be done in a way that will give South Vietnam a chance to survive. It doesn't have to survive forever. It's got to survive for a reasonable time. Then

everybody can say “goddamn we did our part.”. . . I don’t know that South Vietnam can survive forever” (EOB Conversation no. 371-19, Nixon and Haig, 23 October 1972, White House Tapes, Nixon Library).

In July1974—a year and a half after the Paris agreement and five months before VC and NVA fighting would begin to build up to the 1975 Spring Offensive that would overrun South Vietnam by April 1975—Ambassador to Saigon Graham Martin told Kissinger and his aides, Lawrence Eagleburger and W. R. Smyser: “Militarily, they [the South Vietnamese] are holding. Politically, they are more solid than I had the right to hope.” Kissinger replied: “When I made the [January1973] agreement, I thought it might be a two-year thing.

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