Nixon and Vietnam:
It Really Was a Duck Hook

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HIS344: Conflict and Cooperation in the International System Since 1945
29 November, 2016
A duck hook is a shot [Operation Duck Hook] that curves hard to the left [communists win the war] of your target, if you are a right-handed golfer [Nixon]. A duck hook almost always gets a golfer into some kind of trouble on the course [of history].

In 1968, Richard Millhouse Nixon ran a Presidential campaign full of promises to swiftly end the war in Vietnam, and despite having built a career on cold war confrontation, he won in a landslide. Nixon did not directly mention Vietnam in his January 20, 1969, inaugural address, however, he made many references to world peace which were obvious references to the conflict in Vietnam, saying: “the peace we seek—the peace we seek to win—is not victory over any other people, but the peace that comes ‘with healing in its wings’; with compassion for those who have suffered; with understanding for those who have opposed us; with the opportunity for all the peoples of this earth to choose their own destiny.” Within his address we can also see some of Nixon’s motivation for these statements, because as he claims “the greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker” Nixon states in his memoir and analysis of the war, No More Vietnams, that his “first priority [upon entering office] had to be to end the Vietnam War in a way that would achieve the goal for which we fought for so long.” Despite his campaign claims, however, there was no clear plan for how to go about ending the war. In fact, it took almost the entire first year of his presidency for a decision on the Vietnamization strategy famously laid out

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3 Ibid.


in the November 3, 1969, “Silent Majority” speech. Why did this take so long? What options did the Nixon administration consider and how far were they willing to go to try and end the Vietnam War? Among the many strategies considered was Operation Duck Hook, a massive military escalation which even included the possible use of nuclear weapons. Although the operation was never implemented it was seriously considered by Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. That they even contemplated implementing Duck Hook has considerable implications for how we analyze the decision-making process of the Nixon administration. This paper will focus on the decision-making of Nixon and Kissinger, in the first months of Nixon’s presidency, and in particular the choices they made in relation to Duck Hook.

Gary R. Hess’ analysis of the historiography of the war and the description of the two “sides” of analysis in his book, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, provides an excellent starting point for understanding Nixon’s Vietnam strategy. There are essentially two ways historians tend to view the last years of the Vietnam War: revisionist and orthodox. Revisionist depictions of Nixon’s Vietnam strategy depend primarily on the vast memoirs of Nixon and Kissinger which essentially argue that the war in Vietnam was not a loss, but a “lost victory.” That is, the Americans had actually won the war when they pulled out of Vietnam in 1973, but that victory was “lost” in 1975 when South Vietnam fell to the North. According to this analytical view, Saigon fell because the US Congress refused to provide essential financial support. On the other hand, the orthodox interpretation argues that it was impossible for Nixon to exit the war honourably and any attempt to win simply prolonged the inevitable. This

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historical view is best summed up by Hess when he states: “There was no ‘victory’ to be ‘lost,’ because it was unattainable.” Thus while revisionists downplay the decisions made by Nixon and his staff and argue that the strategy for the end of the Vietnam war actually began during the Johnson administration, orthodox historians do not discount the decisions made by the Nixon administration. Jeffrey Kimball is one such historian who argues that while Nixon’s policies were also products of larger forces and broad contexts, the president determines which policies will be preferred. As Kimball states: “the workings of the mind of an individual occupying the American presidency are noteworthy because of the power of the office. They are even more noteworthy when the president’s personality is highly unusual, and Nixon’s personality seems to fit into this category.” Regardless of whether or not history, as Thomas Carlyle said, is truly “but the biography of great men,” investigating the specific statements and decisions made by the main players in the Vietnam War is a valuable analytical tool for understanding the events.

The references to “world peace” in Nixon’s inaugural address are, of course, about the conflict in Vietnam and his comments about the importance of self-determination for the South Vietnamese people has been reiterated by Nixon in his various autobiographies, including No More Vietnams, in which he states that there was but one political goal for which America fought the war: “the South Vietnamese people would have the right to determine their own political

7 Ibid., 192.

8 Ibid., 186.

9 Kimball, 14-15.

future.” It is important to remember that in 1969, Vietnam was not strictly “Nixon’s War.” It had been fought by Nixon’s predecessors and his stated intention was to end it quickly. He expressed what were likely his true feelings towards the war when he remarked at a September 27, 1969, meeting with White House officials at Camp David that he did not intend to be “the first American President to lose a war.” Nixon wrote later that during his transition into office, he and Kissinger reviewed every possible option for ending the conflict “with massive military escalation at one extreme and immediate unilateral withdrawal at the other.” According to Nixon, by the time he was sworn into office he had rejected the “extreme suggestions” of nuclear weapons or mass bombings of irrigation dikes which would have resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. While memoirs are primary documents, they tend to be biased and Nixon’s claims of a unilateral rejection of massive military action against North Vietnam do not quite ring true. In one of Nixon’s other memoirs, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, he tells a slightly different story about the formation of his Vietnam policy. He states that by June of 1969, he decided to “go for broke” and “end the war one way or another—either by negotiated agreement or by an increased use of force.” By his own admission, Nixon was ready to use “whatever military pressure was necessary to prevent them from taking over South

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14 Ibid.

Vietnam by force” and he set November 1, 1969, as the deadline for his ultimatum to North Vietnam.  

It is clear that Nixon was willing to threaten the North Vietnamese with increased military engagement in order to end the war, but just how strongly did he consider expansion of US operations in Vietnam? Duck Hook demonstrates that Nixon was focused on extreme military escalation and came within a few weeks of implementing it. This has been almost completely ignored by revisionist historians and has only recently become a factor in some orthodox analyses. The planning for Duck Hook began at a luncheon in the Pentagon between Nixon, Kissinger, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Earle Wheeler, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird on January 27, 1969. Over lunch, they discussed “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.” At Kissinger’s request, Laird prepared preliminary papers for such a plan and delivered them to Kissinger on February 21, 1969. While Laird makes it clear that the papers are preliminary and require further discussion with other members of staff the working papers provide a good overview of what was discussed at the luncheon and show the early stages of Duck Hook: it was to be “a program of military, political, psychological activities . . . employed by the United States to create fear in the Hanoi leadership that the United States is

16 Ibid.

preparing to undertake new highly damaging military actions against North Vietnam (NVN).”  

The document goes on to list a variety of proposals “which could be implemented singly or in varying combinations,” including the following: renewed and expanded air and naval operations against NVN including closure of Haiphong and blockades, punitive airborne/airmobile expeditions against enemy lines of communications and base areas in Laos and Cambodia, combined airborne/amphibious operations in NVN, subversion of the population and preparation for active resistance by the people against Hanoi, and/or technical escalation (atomic, biological, or chemical). These preliminary plans show the breadth of the campaign considered by Nixon and his staff, and also their continuing indecision.

On March 22, 1969, Kissinger sent Nixon a memorandum which essentially summarized this proposal and Kissinger’s recommendations for negotiation and possible escalation. The crux of this memo was Kissinger's suggestion that in the coming months they “fully coordinate our diplomacy with our military actions in a carefully orchestrated plan.” If they were to escalate the war, Kissinger continued, “we must weigh the physical damage we can do to North Vietnam against the loss of domestic and international support of the American position.” Kissinger ultimately suggests that they engage in “private talks” with the North Vietnamese while developing an alternate plan for possible military escalation. There are other examples of how

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.
these suggestions were implemented by Nixon in the months following this memo, but two that are particularly illustrative for this essay are Nixon’s ultimatum to Ho Chi Minh and the further development and consideration of Duck Hook.

The letter dated July 15, 1969 to Ho Chi Minh was Nixon’s appeal for cooperation to bring a rapid end to the war. Nixon wrote:

You will find us forthcoming and open-minded in a common effort to bring the blessings of peace to the brave people of Vietnam. Let history record that at this critical juncture, both sides turned their face toward peace rather than toward conflict and war.

This letter was delivered by Jean Sainteny, former French Delegate-General in Hanoi. Sainteny was an “old friend” of Kissinger, and Kissinger described Sainteny in his memoir, White House Years: “I trusted Sainteny’s honor and reliability in doing what he had undertaken. He was trusted by the North Vietnamese as well. No more can be asked of an intermediary.” Kissinger goes on to make a brief reference to the letter Sainteny delivered and nothing more. In RN, Nixon alludes to the true nature of the letter, saying that he met with Sainteny at the White House “so that he would be able to talk at first hand about my strong desire for peace . . . [and] say that, unless some serious breakthrough had been achieved by the November 1 deadline, I would regretfully find myself obliged to have recourse ‘to measures of great consequence and force.’” This detail explains why they needed someone who they could trust fully: the letter was not merely a call for peace but also a threat and an ultimatum from Nixon himself. In fact, the


25 Nixon, RN, 393-394.
message was even more of a threat than Nixon implied in *RN*. A declassified document housed at the National Security Archive sheds further light on this meeting: a message sent to Kissinger with a Sainteny-approved translation of his notes of the July 15, 1969, meeting which shows:

He [Nixon] has decided to hope for a positive outcome from the conversations at Paris by November 1, and he is prepared to show good will [sic] by some humanitarian gestures which Mr. Kissinger will be prepared to discuss in detail. But if, however, by the date [November 1, 1969] no valid solution had been reached he will regretfully find himself obliged to have recourse to measures of great consequence and force . . . . Regardless of public opinion or opposition, Mr. Nixon is determined to bring this war to an early conclusion. He totally rejects continued talking and fighting. If this diplomatic approach fails, he will resort to any means necessary.

Also in the National Security Archive is a letter, origin and classification unknown, dated only circa May 1969, which reads:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: The bearer of this letter, M. Jean Saintenny [sic], has my full confidence. I have asked him to act as a personal messenger from me to senior officials of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, including the President of the Republic, Ho Chi Minh. Any written communications, or oral comment thereon, has been reviewed with me personally. M. Saintenny [sic] is thoroughly cognizant of my views on the the subjects he will discuss, and will, I know, present them accurately.

These documents show that Sainteny had authority from Nixon to threaten Ho Chi Minh while delivering an official message of peace. Although Nixon was still reaching for the title of “peacemaker” he was not above using the threat of escalating violence in order to achieve peace.

Planning for Duck Hook was finalized on July 20, 1969. By this time most of the


preliminary ideas had been dropped and the operation was focused on the mining of Haiphong Port Complex “to stop entry of deep draft shipping into the ports . . . and to disrupt major attempts by the North Vietnamese to employ lighterage for offloading deep draft shipping which would be forced to anchor to seaward of the minefields.”

Although this plan was justified as not being offensive “since no weapons are specifically directed against any target,” it also acknowledged that it would be regarded as an escalation of the war “and would be so treated by the Communist world in its propaganda” and would also be regarded as such by “most of the rest of the world.”

The document also claims that the “uneasiness” concerning Vietnam has subsided around the world and that the move would “be generally interpreted as showing determination.” The US could “blunt” the communist propaganda by explaining that the US had gone to great lengths to end the war, citing the bombing halts, withdrawal of troops, and political accommodations. The rest of the document outlines the possible legal ramifications of the mining and comes to the conclusion that “the traditional laws of war do not cover mining except in a state of war” and that the particular circumstances of the cold war had rendered the laws of war irrelevant.

The fact that the creators of the document had to go to such lengths to justify Duck Hook, and also account for significant opposition, shows that this was a very

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29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.
extreme measure.

Over the course of the next few months, planning for Duck Hook continued and the operation was expanded and refined, all while the November 1 deadline approached. It had been decided that Nixon would give a speech on November 3 announcing his official strategy henceforth. In the National Security Archive is a draft of a speech created on September 27, 1969, the intention of which was to officially announce Duck Hook. In it, Nixon would have proclaimed that “it is my sad duty to inform you . . . that the genuine negotiations we had expected have not yet taken place” and that North Vietnam has “refused to credit the word of the United States.”

After outlining all of the ways in which America had tried to negotiate a peace, as per the Duck Hook plan, Nixon would have announced an escalation of “swift, concentrated, and punishing” military actions. This, however, was the final draft for this version of the speech because Nixon soon began reconsidering Duck Hook. A transcript of a telephone conversation between Nixon and Kissinger provides some evidence of this change in his thinking. On September 27, Nixon called Kissinger to discuss a variety of foreign policy issues, and when the conversation turned to Vietnam he expressed concern over a mass of anti-war demonstrations, known as Vietnam Moratorium Day, coming up on October 15. Nixon asked whether it would be possible to make the “tough move” before October 15 and then said he had been “wondering if we shouldn’t.” Nixon’s Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, kept a diary during his four and

33 Draft of a Presidential Speech, September 27, 1969, DNSA.

34 Ibid.

one-half years in the White House in which he commented on what he felt were Nixon’s thoughts and feelings. Haldeman describes how, over the weeks following the conversation with Kissinger, Nixon was preoccupied with Moratorium Day and unsure of which course of action he should take. 36 The Haldeman Diaries outline this uncertainty over the next week or so, until, by October 3, no one was sure which action Nixon would decide to take. Kissinger felt that there were only two options: “bug out or accelerate,” and that the main question is whether Nixon “can hold the government and the people together” for the time that Duck Hook would take to implement. 37 Kissinger was also concerned that Nixon would decide against Duck Hook because the contingency plans didn’t include potential domestic reactions. 38 By October 9, as it became clear to Nixon that the American public would in no way accept escalation of the war, he had ruled out Duck Hook and instead turned towards other options. 39 Instead of going through with his ultimatum and overseeing the implementation of Duck Hook, Nixon spent November 1 at Camp David finalizing his Vietnamization speech. 40

Of course, even with Vietnamization the war did not end that year. In fact, the war was not officially over until well after Watergate and into Gerald Ford’s presidency. To analyze what could have happened had Duck Hook been implemented is to miss the point. Perhaps the war


37 Ibid., 95.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 97.

40 Ibid., 103.
would have ended sooner following an atomic blast. Maybe the war would have ended even later amid massive international condemnation. The crucial question is why Nixon decided against it. Ultimately, it was not because of international disagreement or even legal ramifications but because of domestic politics. Nixon abandoned Duck Hook in large part because of the October 15 moratorium and the ongoing anti-war protests. This all serves to highlight the “workings” of the President's mind as noted by Kimball. 41 Nixon came into office not only seeking the “title of peacemaker” but determined not to be “the first president to lose a war.” When it was clear that the tides of domestic approval, and thus history, would turn against a President who escalated the war Nixon chose the other option. He was not primarily concerned about South Vietnam’s right to self-determination, nor was he concerned about international opinion. What concerned him most was his legacy in America. This is the great irony, and perhaps the great tragedy of Nixon. Because of his obsession with his legacy he was willing to consider even the most extreme actions in Vietnam. Likewise because of this obsession he abruptly reversed course. Duck Hook is one more in a long series of documents that show Nixon to be preoccupied with his legacy to the exclusion and potential detriment of anything else, including the well-being of the country he was leading. The decision to implement the plan, the abrupt reversal, and now the replay of events through declassification of documents; this duck hook definitely got Nixon into some trouble in the course of history.

41 Kimball, 14-15.
Bibliography


