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# H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXVI-9

David L. Prentice. *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam*. University Press of Kentucky, 2023. ISBN: 9780813197760

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Introduction by Pierre Asselin, San Diego State University

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Vietnam War scholarship is as expansive as it is redundant. Recycled tropes and interpretations are its hallmarks. David Prentice's *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam* comes as a breath of fresh air in light of such circumstances. It offers valuable and, above all, original insights into the latter stages of the American war in Vietnam. On the one hand, the book underscores the notable role played by US Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in conditioning President Richard Nixon's approach to Vietnam. Laird, we learn from Prentice, was for all intents and purposes as central as National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger in charting the course navigated by the United States in Southeast Asia after 1968. On the other hand, *Unwilling to Quit* contends that Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) President Nguyen Van Thieu not only accepted but in fact encouraged Nixon's so-called policy of Vietnamization of the war, which was tantamount to the de-Americanization of the anti-Communist military struggle below the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel.

The importance and originality of Prentice's contributions to our understanding of the Vietnam War cannot be overstated, and are not lost on the distinguished scholars who generously agreed to contribute to this roundtable review. Aurélie Basha i Novosejt applauds Prentice's book for being "especially convincing" and making "an important and overdue intervention" by demonstrating that Laird "mattered more than historians have allowed," as did the 1969–1971 period generally. Brian Cuddy similarly commends Prentice for "carefully" and "convincingly" relating how Laird was able to convince Nixon to choose de-Americanization over escalation, which Kissinger favored, in 1969, a decision that was formalized in Nixon's famous "silent majority" speech of 3 November 1969.

Beyond providing genuinely meaningful and fresh insights, *Unwilling to Quit* reads exceptionally well. Its narrative is lucid, engaging, and highly informative. The book is chockful of useful, enlightening information about Vietnamization, the American home front, and the situation inside South Vietnam specifically. Illuminating insights about President Thieu and his regime abound. Contrary to countless other accounts focusing on US policy in Vietnam, this one takes Washington's strategic partners seriously. Prentice deserves credit for presenting the South Vietnamese and their leaders as complex, calculating, multifaceted, and, above all, influential actors who—quite sensibly—were deeply invested in ensuring the long-term survival of the RVN as a non-communist entity. Prentice's narrative never essentializes the Vietnamese; it never reduces them to narrow stereotypes and configurations, as most American studies of the war tend to do. As a result, the book reminds us that as much as the United States conditioned circumstances on the Indochinese Peninsula at the height of the Cold War, so did other, local actors, and President Thieu in particular, especially as those circumstances concerned the de-Americanization of hostilities. The Vietnam War after 1969 was as much Nixon's war as it remained Thieu's war. This approach is entirely consistent with the latest trends in Vietnam War studies underscoring the long history and depth

of Vietnamese anticommunist and noncommunist sentiment, and the role of Saigon leaders and other local agents in shaping events in Vietnam and across the rest of Indochina in the period 1954–1975.<sup>1</sup>

Brian Cuddy is entirely on point when he commends Prentice for his “careful reconstruction of events” and the close attention he paid to how US policymaking “tracked with events and perspectives in South Vietnam.” Alex Ferguson is more direct: “Prentice makes clear that Thieu was no puppet.” As much as Ferguson appreciates the book’s significant “contribution to our understanding of US decision-making,” he believes that “its most important intervention comes in its coverage of the RVN’s attitude towards Vietnamization.” He is effusive in his praise of Prentice’s treatment of Thieu—and rightly so, commenting that the book offers solid proof that “the RVN was neither a tool nor a creation of the United States,” and that the Republic in fact “represented a legitimate form of Vietnamese political expression.” *Unwilling to Quit* is thus “a shining example of the valuable insights that international approaches to the war’s history continue to bring,” Ferguson concludes.

The book of course comes in for criticism. Basha i Novosejt is not persuaded that Vietnamization was a novel, original strategy for which Laird and only Laird deserves credit, on the American side, at least. Similarly, she is not convinced that Nixon’s secretary of defense—to say nothing of the US president himself—indeed had faith in the longer-term merits of Vietnamization. She argues that Prentice could have done more to demonstrate that Vietnamization was no mere attempt at creating a “decent interval,” that the Nixon White House genuinely believed the policy would give the RVN and its armed forces an actual fighting chance after the last American combat troops returned home. Ferguson, for his part, opines that *Unwilling to Quit* “could have done more to zero in on the causal significance of the RVN’s actions in explaining US strategy, particularly considering the enormous weight it gives to developments on the American home front.” But such criticisms are minor relative to all else that the book offers.

Each of us who has read *Unwilling to Quit* for this roundtable agrees: this is not just another book on the Vietnam War, but a crucial contribution to its historiography. To be sure, Prentice does countless things—big and small—right in his book. Fundamentally, he reminds us of the importance of considering the Vietnamese perspective in addressing the Vietnam War, and shows how rigorous research—a really deep dive into the archival record—can help us develop new understandings of old issues. *Unwilling to Quit* is model Vietnam War scholarship. While it goes without saying that the book is a must-read for those who are interested in the latter stages of the conflict, it should also be closely scrutinized by anyone seeking to

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<sup>1</sup> See George Veith, *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam’s Shattered Dreams* (Encounter Books, 2021); Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (University of Hawaii Press, 2022); Tuong Vu and Sear Fear, eds., *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: South Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building* (Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2020); Tuong Vu and Nu-Anh Tran (eds.), *Building a Republican Nation in Vietnam, 1920–1963* (University of Hawaii Press, 2023); Tuong Vu and Trinh M. Luu, eds., *Republican Vietnam, 1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora* (University of Hawaii Press, 2023); Vinh The Lam, *The History of South Vietnam: The Quest for Legitimacy and Stability, 1963–1967* (Routledge, 2021); Van Nguyen-Marshall, *Between War and the State: Civil Society in South Vietnam, 1954–1975* (Cornell University Press, 2023); and Duy Lap Nguyen, *The Unimagined Community: Imperialism and Culture in South Vietnam* (Manchester University Press, 2022).

understand what constitutes superior, cutting-edge Vietnam War scholarship that advances the field and makes all of us better students of this most tragic but enduringly fascinating conflict.

### Contributors:

**David L. Prentice** is a historian and editor at Oklahoma State University. His work has appeared in *Diplomatic History*, *Journal of Military History*, *Cold War History*, and several edited volumes. When he's not writing, he's chasing (and being chased by) his cows and kids on his farm.

**Pierre Asselin** holds the Dwight E. Stanford Chair in US Foreign Relations History at San Diego State University. He is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (2002), *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (2013), and *Vietnam's American War: A New History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2024). His most recent article is “National Liberation by Other Means: US Visitor Diplomacy in the Vietnam War” in *Past & Present* (2024). Asselin is editor of *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War, Volume III: Endings*, forthcoming in November 2024.

**Aurélie Basha i Novosejt** is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Kent. Her first book *I Made Mistakes; Robert McNamara and Vietnam* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) reconsidered McNamara's role as the putative architect of the Vietnam War. Her most recent publication, co-authored with Christopher McNulty, “Tempered by War: The Military Experiences of Vietnam Decision-Makers,” *International History Review* (2023), challenged the dichotomy between ‘civilians’ and ‘veterans’ that underpins political science theories and traced the lineage of key decision-makers' thinking on Vietnam back to their experiences during the Second World War. Her next book explores the evolution of civil-military relations in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

**Brian Cuddy** is Lecturer in Security Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. A historian of US foreign relations, he is the editor (with Fredrik Logevall) of *The Vietnam War in the Pacific World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022) and (with Victor Kattan) of *Making Endless War: The Vietnam and Arab-Israeli Conflicts in the History of International Law* (University of Michigan Press, 2023).

**Alex Ferguson** is a Teaching Associate in 20<sup>th</sup> Century US History at the University of Sheffield. He is a historian of the United States and the world, primarily interested in the making, sustaining, and breaking of US alliances in Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s. His publications include: “Press Management and U.S. Support for France in Indochina, 1950–1954,” *Diplomatic History* (2018), and “Reassessing U.S. Involvement in the Appointment of Ngo Dinh Diem: Nguyen Huu Tri and the American Search for a Third Force in Vietnam, 1950–1954,” forthcoming with the *Journal of Cold War Studies*. He is currently working on two projects. The first, provisionally entitled *Americans in Saigon: The Franco-American Alliance and the Fight to Keep France Fighting in Vietnam*, explores the ways a diverse cast of Americans—from idealistic aid workers to ambitious visiting politicians to grizzled war reporters to dutiful diplomatic spouses—shaped Washington's campaign to sustain France's war in Vietnam in the early 1950s. His second project, *The*

*Analogous Alliance: The United States, Ngo Dinh Diem, and the Struggle for Vietnam, 1954–1963*, investigates how historical and contemporary analogies emerged as a lingua franca through which Americans debated and determined Ngo Dinh Diem’s suitability as their chief ally in Vietnam.

David Prentice's *Unwilling to Quit* is an eagerly anticipated contribution to the scholarship on the end of the American war in Vietnam. His placeholder *Diplomatic History* article gave a flavor of what he would add to the relevant debates.<sup>1</sup> His main arguments are that Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird mattered more than historians have allowed; that the 1969–1971 period, rather than 1972–1973, was more important to the configuration of the United States' departure; and finally, that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam), in the shape of President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, welcomed Vietnamization. He is especially convincing on the first two points. Casting President Richard Nixon's policies in the context of intra-administration struggles, Prentice persuasively shows that March 1969 was the key turning point in terms of how the United States would disengage from the war. From that moment on, the withdrawal of US troops was effectively pegged to improvements in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) rather than to progress in negotiations or even to the “mutual withdrawal” of North Vietnamese troops. The latter had been the standing US policy since the Manila Conference of 1966.

This review is organized around four main questions or themes where Prentice's contribution is especially valuable or where shades of disagreement exist. The four threads are: Laird as a central figure in the Nixon administration; defining the salient “domestic context”; the nature of the end-goal of Vietnamization; and, related to the latter, whether Vietnamization under Laird was an entirely novel approach.

Notwithstanding journalist Dale Van Atta's biography—which grew out of Laird's original intention to write his memoirs—or the official Office of the Secretary of Defense's historical series, the tendency of historians to gloss over Melvin Laird is curious.<sup>2</sup> Writing a book about Laird and Vietnam was, in some respects, walking through an open door that many, not least Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, had pointed to: Nixon specifically designated Vietnamization as “Laird's strategy” and Kissinger has been unusually effusive about Laird's ability to get his way in the administration.<sup>3</sup> Prentice's book, therefore, makes an important and overdue intervention.

Even though the question is an interesting one, Prentice does not really address *why* historians have overlooked Laird. Many scholars are drawn to Nixon and Kissinger, whose kind of bookish intelligence and historical sensitivity is familiar. Men like Laird, who had fewer personality quirks and were operators who were able to maneuver around the messy world of Washington politics, are stranger beasts. Recounting Laird's ability to work with committees and subcommittees in Congress makes for less gripping reading than books that are anchored in the complex psychologies and geopolitical visions of men like Kissinger

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Prentice, “Choosing ‘the Long Road’: Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, Vietnamization, and the War over Nixon's Vietnam Strategy,” *Diplomatic History* 40:3 (2016): 445–474.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); Richard A. Hunt, *Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military, 1969–1973* (Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (Simon & Schuster, 1985), 105; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Little, Brown & Co., 1979), 32–33.

and Nixon. But, as Prentice shows, given the US system of government, Laird's policies were enduring and effective. Ultimately, Prentice's writing skills make what could have been a dry narrative into a deeply readable and engaging text. The musical references—each of the chapters is named after a contemporaneous song—add a charming touch as well.

Like many, Prentice uses the “domestic context” as a shorthand for disparate factors.<sup>4</sup> He draws on Gallup polls to suggest that “time” was not on the administration's side and that the “antiwar movement would succeed” (31). By his own admission, popular support was not clearly antiwar, and fears of the homefront in the administration were based more on “perception than reality” (41-42). Implicit in his analysis is that the draft was the more important issue and once this receded—once American lives were not at stake in Vietnam—popular concern with the war receded too.<sup>5</sup>

The more salient domestic context is the budgetary one: Laird's allusions to “budgetary realities” read like a repetitive refrain that shoots down other advisors' (chiefly Kissinger's) requests (113, 129, 134, 145, 150). It was on budgetary issues especially that “no one understood the domestic context better than Laird” (39). The post-Tet landscape included a congressional reassertion of power and eroding public patience for the war, but the more urgent concern for Laird was a fiscal one. It was not until 1968 that President Lyndon Johnson's most hawkish advisors, including National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, recognized that continuing to fight in Vietnam would have real consequences on the international economic order that was centered on the US dollar, which relied on the fiscal prudence of US presidents. By 1971, the Bretton Woods system collapsed altogether.<sup>6</sup>

More consequentially, starting in 1968, the Senate forced the secretaries of defense to provide a transparent view of the costs of the war. Before that time, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara engineered budgetary gimmicks, which included providing an arbitrary end date for the war in his main appropriations request, which he would then correct with a supplementary request.<sup>7</sup> As a senior Republican representative on the Defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, then Congressman Melvin Laird had led the charge in criticizing McNamara for these manipulations. This was the context in which Laird, who was now on the other side of congressional hearings, refused to submit a supplemental request in 1970, and reduced authorized air sorties in Vietnam. As Prentice shows, however, Laird continued McNamara's

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance: Charles DeBenedetti and Charles Chatfield, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era* (Syracuse University Press, 1990); Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (Yale University Press, 1999); Melvin Small, *At the Water's Edge: American Politics and the Vietnam War* (Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Melvin Small, “Bring the Boys Home Now! Antiwar Activism and Withdrawal from Vietnam—and Iraq,” *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (2010): 543-553.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Bordo and Barry Eichengreen, eds., *A Retrospective on the Bretton Woods System*. (Chicago University Press, 1993); Allan H. Meltzer, *U.S. Policy in the Bretton Woods Era* (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Alwyn H. King, *The Impact of the Vietnam Conflict on the Economy of the United States* (US Army War College, 1980), 3-5. See, also with respect to the use of reserve troops, also beginning in 1968, James T. Currie, “The Army Reserve and Vietnam,” *Parameters* 14:3 (1984): 75-85.



approach of disguising the costs for the transfer of equipment as part of the Vietnamization program by drawing from reserves in Taiwan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (113).

Prentice's argument is less convincing on the question of whether Laird ever genuinely had "faith in Vietnamization" (184) and whether, therefore, this book disproves historian Ken Hughes's suggestion that the administration only sought a "decent interval" in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> Nixon's "stubborn optimism" (186) was questionable and arguably did not offset the callous realism on display in the White House tapes. Speaking to Kissinger about the South Vietnamese, he observed: "Well, if they're that collapsible, maybe they just have to be collapsed. That's another way to look at it, too. I mean, we have to—we've got to remember, we cannot keep this child sucking at the tit when the child is four years old. You know?"<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, Laird is on record suggesting that even a large-scale transfer of equipment could not offset inherent weaknesses in South Vietnam, or, in his less-than-diplomatic terms, "not to delude the GVN [Government of the Republic of Vietnam] and RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Air Force] that hardware can in some way substitute for backbone."<sup>10</sup> To be fair, Prentice notes that at the end of the 1971, after the failed Lam Som 719 Operation in Laos and the embarrassing South Vietnamese elections where Thiệu's leadership flaws were on full-display, Laird experienced a moment of pause in his confidence over Vietnamization (165-167).

Ultimately, Laird, and for that matter Thiệu, needed to be publicly optimistic about the prospects of Vietnamization. Prentice writes that "Vietnamization sounded less like retreat and more like a goal-oriented program to reduce the American presence while protecting South Vietnam from communist aggression" (61). The operative word here is "sounded." Thiệu's support for "Vietnamization with enthusiasm and pride" (131-132) is hard to take at face value. It would have been impossible for him to have met the manpower requirements of the war, which he was already struggling to do, and to have offset the economic consequences of US withdrawal, without a buoyant public message. Even if concerns with Vietnamization in the field and in Washington (137) did not percolate back to Saigon, Thiệu must have recognized that Vietnamization was the only option that would have given South Vietnam a fighting chance, however slight.<sup>11</sup>

Prentice recounts Nixon's question to the journalist Theodore White: "It was important that we get out, but that we not be defeated. How do you liquidate that war with honor?" (30). To riff off another song, this one from Paul Simon, which was released a couple months after South Vietnam's collapse, there are not 50 ways to leave a quagmire war, as seen most recently in Afghanistan. Prentice shows that Vietnamization defined the pace and shape of the United States' departure from Vietnam. But it could only work, even in

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<sup>8</sup> Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics: The Nixon Tapes, the Vietnam War, and the Casualties of Reelection* (University of Virginia Press, 2015); Hughes, "Fatal Politics: Nixon's Political Timetable for Withdrawing from Vietnam," *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (2010): 497-506.

<sup>9</sup> Conversation 793-6, October 6, 1972, 9:30 a.m.–10:03 a.m., Oval Office, Miller Center Presidential Recordings, [https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4006749/notes\\_open](https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/4006749/notes_open).

<sup>10</sup> Hunt, *Melvin Laird*, 246.

<sup>11</sup> For early field reports on the weakness of Vietnamization, see Kevin M. Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969–1971* (University Press of Kansas, 2016); Robert J. Thompson, *Clear, Hold, and Destroy: Pacification in Phú Yên and the American War in Vietnam* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2021).

the modest objective of providing a fig leaf for US abandonment, if they at least pretended that it *could* work.

A more general question remains about whether Vietnamization was an original strategy, and whether Laird deserves as much credit as Prentice gives him. In so far as he put ideas about “de-Americanizing” the war into practice, the answer is obviously yes. But those ideas were more than just “parlance” (16) and contrary to Prentice’s assertion, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA) Paul Warnke did not influence McNamara’s shift towards similar ideas as much as Warnke’s predecessor, John T. McNaughton, had.<sup>12</sup>

Prentice is right to point to antecedents of the Nixon Doctrine and Vietnamization. It had a lineage in John F. Kennedy’s comment to the journalist Walter Cronkite that it was “[South Vietnam’s] war to win or lose” (188) and before that, in the Eisenhower administration’s view that the United States should only help countries in the “Third World” that were willing to help themselves (91-92), though as vice president in that administration, Nixon was more inclined to recommend direct intervention (26-27). But Vietnamization had clear and more recent roots within ISA too.

That Warnke stayed on at ISA frustrated the Nixon administration, but his tenure provides a valuable link to ideas on Vietnamization that swept through ISA since at least 1966.<sup>13</sup> In April 1966, in his private diary, McNaughton noted that he and McNamara agreed that they should move to a program that emphasized pacification efforts and only support “people who help themselves.”<sup>14</sup> In October, McNamara intimated as much to Johnson, and expressed his frustration that South Vietnamese allies were still falling short of “effective action.”<sup>15</sup> However, it was not until November 1967, in a report that ultimately got him fired, that McNamara more forcefully advocated for handing over the “responsibility for security” to the South Vietnamese, and in so doing came back to a view that he had supported in the Kennedy administration.<sup>16</sup>

From the outset, the underlying assumption behind Vietnamization, even if it was only expressed in private, was that South Vietnam would almost certainly “go over the waterfall.”<sup>17</sup> Or, as Warnke later noted, thinking back to his state of mind in 1967: “So my sense was that once we got out of Vietnam, North

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<sup>12</sup> Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, *I Made Mistakes: Robert McNamara’s Vietnam War* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 188-200.

<sup>13</sup> Van Atta, *With Honor*, 142.

<sup>14</sup> Diary entry, 25 January 1966 and 5 April 1966, John T. McNaughton diary, John T. McNaughton Collection (3091), Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson, 14 October 1966, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume IV, Vietnam, 1966: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68vo4/d268>.

<sup>16</sup> Memorandum from Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson, 1 November 1967, Folder 1, Box II: 94, Robert S. McNamara Papers, Library of Congress.

<sup>17</sup> McNaughton diary, 30 April 1966.

Vietnam would automatically take over.”<sup>18</sup> These plans were designed above all to extricate the United States from Vietnam, and the language of its civilian architects mirrored the “decent interval” logic of the Nixon administration. In a particularly blunt exchange in January 1966 with former Deputy National Security Adviser Carl Kaysen, McNaughton recorded: “His main points were that we should get out, slowly. He said we should strike a deal to let the VC [Viet Cong] into the government, and then should allow the South to be absorbed by the North—but not faster than over a 5-year period.”<sup>19</sup> Faced with Central Intelligence Agency intelligence that South Vietnamese forces did not have a fighting chance on their own, McNaughton commented, “If the Vietnamese can’t handle their own internal problem themselves, it is too damned bad.”<sup>20</sup>

In the end, and as Nixon noted in a rebuke to Laird’s immediate predecessor Clark Clifford, while his predecessors might have had ideas, they never actually *did* anything with them. For that, the President mattered as well. Nixon’s willingness to listen to Laird’s counsel ultimately altered the course of the ending of the war in Vietnam. Laird was too savvy an operator to provide his unfiltered view in writing and is relatively absent in the White House tapes, so his final prognosis for South Vietnam is unknown. Nevertheless, Prentice has clearly delineated his impact on the process of extricating US troops from Vietnam. In so doing, he has provided an important and compelling counterpoint to the existing scholarship.

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<sup>18</sup> Oral History of Paul C. Warnke, Eight Interview, 18 April 2001, Historical Society of the District of Columbia, <https://dcchs.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/041801-Warnke-Interview-8.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> McNaughton diary, 15 January 1966.

<sup>20</sup> McNaughton diary, 16 December 1966.

With *Unwilling to Quit*, David Prentice joins the growing group of scholars who are shifting attention from questions of when, why, and how the United States got into the Vietnam War, to questions of when, why, and how it got out of the war. It is an important set of questions with consequences not just for understanding this particular armed conflict, but also for US foreign policy more broadly. Prentice's answer to the "how" question is Vietnamization, "the strategy of replacing US soldiers with South Vietnamese forces" (1). He tells the story of this strategy in eight excellent chapters, which are collectively the product of diligent archival research in multiple locations and carefully considered analysis. His historiographical interventions mostly relate to the "when" and "why" questions.

"Historians who focus on [President Richard Nixon's] and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's diplomacy after 1971 are looking at the wrong period," writes Prentice. "The decisions made from 1969 through 1971 were decisive on the war's outcome" (2). But given that at least some historians who have written on Nixon's war agree with Prentice on this point, perhaps the more important debates are those happening *within* the 1969–1971 period. David Schmitz, for example, has similarly argued that the early years of Nixon's presidency "marked a crucial turning point," but Schmitz's "new periodization of the war" locates the crux of that turning point as the last half of 1970 and the first half of 1971.<sup>1</sup> For Schmitz, it was only after the Cambodian incursion's fallout that Nixon's goal shifted from escalation and victory to extraction.

Prentice, in contrast, sees the key moment as having occurred earlier—in October 1969. It was Nixon's decision at that time not to proceed with Duck Hook—the plan for "a ferocious air and naval offensive designed to decimate North Vietnam" (88)—and instead to go all-in on Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird's policy of de-Americanization (Vietnamization's original moniker) that is the key moment for Prentice. The book steadily builds to its climax in its description of the events of 3 November 1969, when Nixon delivered a crucial public address in the wake of an expired ultimatum to Hanoi. Chapters two through five alternate coverage between Kissinger's preference for "brutal" (108, 110) coercive diplomacy to shorten the war by forcing concessions from Hanoi, and Laird's "long, Vietnamized war" (123). Throughout these chapters, Prentice shows Nixon deliberating, perhaps even dithering, between his two advisors and their preferred strategies.

The tension in Prentice's plot is resolved at the end of chapter five, when the balance of pressures tipped Nixon toward Laird. Prentice carefully excavates the background to the 3 November speech, which was "initially intended to announce the beginning of Duck Hook" (117). In a compelling sequence, Prentice shows how the composition process unfolded to reveal Nixon's chosen path, with successive drafts slowly but surely moving the speech away from its original intention and toward a public affirmation of Vietnamization. While the 3 November 1969 address is famous for its signature "appeal to the 'great silent

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<sup>1</sup> David F. Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), xiii, xv.

majority' of Americans who were not protesting the war," Prentice convincingly argues that its ultimate significance was in "firmly establish[ing] Vietnamization as the administration's strategy" (122).

In making Nixon's 3 November address the peak of his narrative arc, Prentice's history accords with at least some of Jeffrey Kimball's periodization, which similarly traces the key shift in Nixon's strategy to late 1969.<sup>2</sup> Prentice's disagreements with Kimball's interpretation lie less in the "when" of the long-course strategy's initiation than in the "why," with Prentice clearly distancing his work from the "decent interval" school of thought associated with Kimball (230n24 and 180).<sup>3</sup> The "decent interval" idea suggests that Nixon and Kissinger came to accept the inevitability of South Vietnam's defeat and simply (and cynically) sought a lag between the US withdrawal and South Vietnam's collapse sufficient to preserve their credibility. "Nixon had better intentions when he decided upon Vietnamization in 1969," argues Prentice (180). "He accepted and pursued Vietnamization in good conscience" (182).

In place of a "decent interval," Prentice suggests the idea of a "decent chance" (186). For all its obvious weaknesses and for all the poor decisions that affected its implementation, Vietnamization was not destined to fail. "It created lots of chances in 1969–1971 for" the South Vietnamese government and military "to get it right" (186). Prentice acknowledges that the strategy of Vietnamization was a gamble, but that given the alternatives it was not unreasonable for Nixon to roll the dice.

This conclusion is supported by Prentice's close examination of South Vietnamese attitudes to Vietnamization. Prentice contests arguments which suggest that the South Vietnamese government was wary of Vietnamization (6, 71, 212n73, 231n32). In his most significant finding, Prentice instead shows that President Nguyen Van Thieu led on Vietnamization. Thieu appreciated the pressures of US public opinion on Nixon, recognized that Vietnamization would allow for American support (minus ground troops) to continue for some time, and ultimately accepted that South Vietnam would at some point need to stand on its own. Thieu takes pride of place alongside Laird in Prentice's gallery of Vietnamization's champions.

The "decent chance" idea suggests, in turn, that had some decisions been made differently, or had they landed differently, then Vietnamization might have achieved better results. One of Prentice's key messages is the contingent nature of Vietnamization. He identifies two main areas of contingency. First, Nixon's choice to go with the strategy of Vietnamization was an open one. In providing something of an end-run around North Vietnam's intransigence on negotiating a mutual withdrawal (something President Lyndon Johnson ran up against), Vietnamization charted a new path. But it was not Nixon's only option, and the president could just have easily plumped for Kissinger's short-course strategy in that crucial month of

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (University Press of Kansas, 2004), 22–23; Jeffrey Kimball. Review of Schmitz, David F., *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. September, 2014, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41755>.

<sup>3</sup> Prentice does not directly cite Kimball regarding the "decent interval" thesis, referencing instead the work of David Anderson, "No More Vietnams: Historians Debate the Policy Lessons of the Vietnam War," in Anderson, and John Ernst, eds., *The War that Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War* (University Press of Kentucky, 2007), and Ken Hughes, *Fatal Politics: The Nixon Tapes, the Vietnam War, and the Casualties of Reelection* (University of Virginia Press, 2015).

October 1969. Second, Washington and Saigon both made errors at crucial points in the implementation of Vietnamization that lengthened its odds. “I argue that there was no teleological winding down of America’s war in Vietnam,” writes Prentice. Vietnamization “was neither a holdover from the Johnson administration nor a foreordained process” (1).

Prentice’s careful reconstruction of events in both Washington and Saigon (and on occasion other places) to some extent bears out the claim of contingency. But how far does the claim go? Regarding the climactic decision of October 1969, it is unclear how viable Duck Hook and the short-course strategy were. Prentice provides plenty of reasons to doubt that it was a history-altering “crossroads” (103). Even among the team of Kissinger’s aides who were tasked with planning the “savage, decisive blow” there was an unspoken assumption “that anything longer than two weeks would precipitate a backlash at home that would encourage the North Vietnamese to continue waiting out the Americans” (105). The military advice from General Creighton Abrams and General Earle Wheeler was that a “no-holds-barred solution” could not work within two weeks (107). “Duck Hook was simply too short” (108) and, according to National Security Council staffer William Watts, a “*fairyland* in terms of the projections” (111, italics in the original) and “a military pipedream” (114). It would also be costly, both financially and politically: only two Republican senators supported the renewed bombing of North Vietnam (109). Given all these factors, the October 1969 decision was surely weighted in favor of Vietnamization.

However, it is a worthwhile thought experiment to examine what the results might have been if Nixon had employed Kissinger’s short-course strategy. It is likely that something akin to the later backlash against the 1970 Cambodian incursion would have resulted, which only served to narrow Nixon’s options and entrench Vietnamization as the only viable strategy. Duck Hook may have changed the timing and pace of Vietnamization, but it is not clear how it would have fundamentally altered the American exit.

Regarding the implementation of Vietnamization after October 1969, there are several episodes that loom large in Prentice’s account of what might have been. On the South Vietnamese side, Thieu’s overconfidence and South Vietnam’s economic travails led Thieu to alienate members of the National Assembly and push unpopular reforms (152-156). As Thieu “aggrandized his power and cracked down on dissent, he became more the dictator American doves had long held him to be” (156). The presidential election of 1971, which saw Thieu returned as president unopposed receiving (officially) 94 percent of the vote, ruined “what should have been a cathartic political process” and “did irreparable harm to the Republic’s legitimacy” (164).

On the American side, the most significant contingency was Nixon’s disastrous decision to green-light the Cambodian incursion. “Nixon, Laird, and Thieu had predicated Vietnamization on congressional goodwill and largesse,” writes Prentice; “The president forfeited that in Cambodia” (149). It was Congress that ultimately ended the American war in Vietnam. But suppose Nixon did not make this error of “epic proportions,” in the *Boston Globe*’s words (148)? Prentice runs the counterfactual thought process himself in the book’s conclusion. “Cambodia represented a missed opportunity,” he writes (185). Rather than throwing away his political capital on an expansion of the war, Nixon “should have worked with Congress to get the aid” that Vietnamization needed (185). “By agreeing to a gradual yet total US withdrawal, he

might have gotten legislation that guaranteed assistance over a fixed period—Thieu’s Midway proposal for four years of military aid, followed by four years of economic Vietnamization,” suggests Prentice, adding that perhaps Nixon “could have convinced legislators to pledge that American airpower would defend South Vietnam during this eight-year period” (185).<sup>4</sup>

It is telling that this counterfactual history really only buys more time for Vietnamization. Time was a precious commodity in the Nixon administration. As Prentice writes, “‘Time’ was perhaps the most spoken word in the White House that year [1969], its use connoting the image of an hourglass with the grains of popular support steadily running out” (31). But this was hardly new. Time had long been a dominant motif in America’s Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> In November 1964, as the Johnson administration debated initiating the regular bombing of North Vietnam, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara suggested that “the strengthening effect [of the bombing] could at least buy time, possibly measured in years.”<sup>6</sup> There was no guarantee—and plenty of doubts (e.g., 246n15)—that yet more time in the 1970s would have led to a markedly different outcome in the long term. As Prentice himself notes, “[a] longer war did not prove a better war” (181).

Poor decisions and other events in the period 1969–1971 did not create Vietnamization’s fundamental weaknesses but simply “revealed” them, in Prentice’s language (143, 160). Had a less controversial, cheaper, de-Americanized (with the exception of airpower) war continued through to 1978, then what? Prentice ends the book by putting ultimate responsibility on the South Vietnamese “to win or lose the battle for hearts, minds, and territory” (188). Would South Vietnam have been better prepared for that battle in 1978? Or would it have needed yet more time?<sup>7</sup>

Not all the fundamental weaknesses lay on the South Vietnamese side, however, and in dismissing the “decent interval” thesis and instead showing that Nixon was indeed committed to the long-standing American policy of preserving an independent non-communist South Vietnam, Prentice’s book forces us to consider the fundamental weaknesses on the American side. It might well be more comforting to attribute Nixon’s wartime decision-making principally to cynicism and deception because cynicism and

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<sup>4</sup> At this point in the text, Prentice adds a second counterfactual scenario—Congress cutting off funds for the war much sooner than it did—which briefly disrupts and confuses the primary counterfactual argument. He indicates that this will be clarified in any new editions of the book.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, 2nd ed. (Brookings Institution Press, 2016 [1979]), 302-322, especially 314-316.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, 315.

<sup>7</sup> Compare Andrew Gawthorpe’s recent work, which is much less inclined to see contingency and possibility: “Nation building was an unavoidable condition of victory for the United States in the Vietnam War. It was also, given the legacies of Vietnamese history and the unfolding course of the war, almost certainly preordained to be impossible to achieve.” Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as Well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 190. Vietnamization (Prentice’s focus) and nation building (Gawthorpe’s focus) are intricately connected. Noting that “Vietnamization encompassed both RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] improvement and pacification,” Prentice cites Martin Clemis’s observation that “they were, in short, two faces of a single strategic coin” (232n38). On Gawthorpe’s preference for the term “nation building” over “pacification,” see *To Build as Well as Destroy*, 12-13.

deception are more easily fixed. In contrast, to acknowledge Nixon's good faith regarding South Vietnam is to return us to the bind that Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts identified not long after the fall of Saigon: that Vietnam War decision-making was not a bug in the US system, but a feature of it.

"If Vietnam were a story of how the decision-making system failed, that is, a story of how US leaders did not do what they wanted to do, did not realize what they were doing, did not understand what was happening, or got their way principally by lying to Congress and the American people," Gelb and Betts argued in 1979, "it would be easy to package a large and assorted box of panaceas." But none of those panaceas would have "appreciably altered the thrust of the war"—ultimately "they were all third-order issues because the US political-bureaucratic system did not fail; it worked."<sup>8</sup> While Gelb and Betts were principally interested in the administrations of Nixon's predecessors, Prentice's narrative suggests that the system continued to "work" under Nixon, and that it could have continued to "work" for some time longer had Congress not put an end to the war.

*Unwilling to Quit* offers an excellent examination of policymaking in the early years of Nixon's Vietnam War. The book is made even better by the attention it gives to how that policymaking tracked with events and perspectives in South Vietnam. But it is not a story that provides any easy lessons, in the end leaving the reader suspended between the post-revisionist embrace of "complexity and contingency" (180), of "imagining what might have been if leaders on all sides had made different choices" (188), and the uneasy feeling that something much more fundamental than a very narrow set of leadership choices needed to change given that, in Gelb's words, US policy toward Vietnam "flowed almost inevitably from the fundamentals of American democracy, political culture, and the typical machinations and calculations of the U.S. national security bureaucracy."<sup>9</sup> "In the final analysis," writes Prentice on the book's concluding page, "the United States proved it could end its participation in the war, but it could not unburden itself of the traumas that intervention created" (188). To which we might add a reflection from Gelb, writing in 2016: "It is precisely because Vietnam decision-making patterns continue to underpin America's political and policy processes that we must keep staring at that complex trauma."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, 331.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, "Preface to the Classic Edition," in Gelb and Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam*, xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Gelb, "Preface to the Classic Edition," xiii.



In 2020, the *Texas National Security Review* published an article by Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall under the provocative title “Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations.”<sup>1</sup> It sparked a fierce reaction, with several scholars expressing reservations about the article’s assessment of recent methodological innovations in the field.<sup>2</sup> Bessner and Logevall received particular criticism for their suggestion that scholars had too fervently embraced international and transnational approaches to the history of US foreign relations. They argued, despite the “salutary effects” that these approaches had brought to our understanding of the history of the United States’ engagement with the world, that this scholarship had unduly and, often implicitly, worked to de-emphasize the role and power of the American state and the domestic forces that so often determined its decisions.<sup>3</sup> To rectify this issue, they called for a “rebalancing” in the field in which the study of US government elites and domestic politics “reclaims a— not the—central place in the scholarship” and in which there is a “general recognition” of the “overweening power” of the United States in the years after 1945.<sup>4</sup> To substantiate their claims, Bessner and Logevall looked to the subject of the Vietnam War, Logevall’s area of expertise and one of the sub-fields that has in recent years been so transformed by transnational and, particularly, international approaches.<sup>5</sup> While again recognizing the value of the work produced by scholars who had surfed the international and transnational waves, the authors suggested that the sub-field of Vietnam War studies had drifted into rocky waters in too wholeheartedly “decentering the United States” in its analysis and “attributing too much causal force for the war’s course to local and transnational actors.”<sup>6</sup>

David Prentice’s excellent book, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam*, provides a bridge between the traditional diplomatic histories of old that Bessner and Logevall worried would be consigned to the dustbin of the academy, and scholarly work that has taken the international turn.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, “Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (Spring 2020), 38-55, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8867>

<sup>2</sup> One of the most noteworthy exchanges about the article took place in a May 2020 H-Diplo Roundtable. H-Diplo Roundtable XXXI-42 on Bessner and Logevall, “Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” 25 May 2020, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-42>.

<sup>3</sup> Bessner and Logevall, “Recentring the United States,” 40

<sup>4</sup> Bessner and Logevall, “Recentring the United States,” 40.

<sup>5</sup> For Logevall’s two most influential works on the Vietnam War, themselves a product of the international turn, see Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1999); Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (Random House, 2012). For additional examples of work on the Vietnam Wars that has emerged out of the international turn, see, for example, Lien-Hang T Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (University of California Press, 2013); Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2013); Edward G. Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 2013); James Waite, *The End of the First Indochina War: A Global History* (Routledge, 2012); Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (University Press of Kentucky, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Bessner and Logevall, “Recentring the United States,” 49.

*Unwilling to Quit* explores “when, why, and how the United States curtailed its involvement in Vietnam” in the late 1960s and early 1970s (2). Prentice’s primary focus is President Richard Nixon’s decision in late 1969 to Vietnamize the conflict by steadily withdrawing American troops and passing primary responsibility for the war’s conduct to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Prentice contends that it was Vietnamization, and not the diplomatic negotiations that took place between representatives of the United States and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in Paris, that brought US involvement in Vietnam to an end (4).

In explaining why Nixon, who the author describes as “one of the war’s most consistent hawks,” embraced Vietnamization, *Unwilling to Quit* emphasizes the importance of both domestic and international contexts (4). Prentice argues that “antiwar unrest, growing public antipathy to the war, and especially vocal dissent in Congress” weighed heavily on the minds of senior figures in the Nixon administration as they sought a solution in Vietnam (5). This pressure worked to limit policymakers’ room for maneuver and, ultimately, convinced them to decide against a strategy of escalation in favor of a steady unilateral withdrawal of US troops. These figures hoped that Vietnamization would ease domestic pressure, providing them with the freedom to continue supplying the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) with the assistance it needed to ward off the dual threats of the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the DRV’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). Additionally, Prentice argues that US policymakers were reacting to developments in Vietnam, in which both the military and diplomatic strategy of the Vietnamese communists and the RVN’s program of reforms and openness to bearing more of the military burden helped usher US policymakers towards Vietnamization. Only by reckoning with the powerful pull of domestic and international forces can we understand why America’s war in Vietnam ended when and in the way it did.

In one respect, then, Prentice provides the kind of US government-focused study that Bessner and Logevall called for in their article, one which emphasizes the domestic political forces that influenced how a powerful group of American elites determined the course of US foreign relations. The book shows that Bessner and Logevall were correct to suggest that historians were “misguided” in assuming that “all the US-related questions about the war have already been examined,” even if it is not clear how widely held that assumption is in the field.<sup>7</sup> Regardless, *Unwilling to Quit* unearths much that is new and important about US involvement in Vietnam. The book’s handling of the American domestic political context in which the strategy of Vietnamization arose, was constructed, and then embraced is skillful, persuasive, and novel, driven by deep research in mountains of archival evidence that was carefully tilled from a range of US archival repositories. Even as the “temperaments and geopolitical philosophies” of Nixon and other hawks drew them towards more escalatory actions, the administration could never quite shake the sense that the options they had at their disposal were circumscribed by congressional opinion and vocal anti-war protesters (4).

Although the book does an excellent job of drawing out the critical roles played by Congress and the anti-war movement, it is weaker in its coverage of another important domestic force: the American media, which is given a bit part role in the drama that unfolds. This could reflect the limited degree to which

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<sup>7</sup> Bessner and Logevall, “Recentring the United States,” 51.

policymakers worried about press coverage in the buildup to and aftermath of the Vietnamization decision, although given the Nixon administration's deep interest in how its policies were received at home and the spiky address that Vice President Spiro Agnew delivered about television news in Des Moines, Iowa just over a week after Nixon announced Vietnamization, that seems doubtful.<sup>8</sup> Of course, no history of the period can be fully comprehensive in its coverage. In this instance, however, *Unwilling to Quit* might have done more to reflect on the ways the administration reacted to the media's interpretation of Vietnamization and the efforts of Nixon and others to try to shape the way television news and the printed press presented this strategy. This small omission aside, Prentice's book makes a valuable contribution to scholarly understanding of the intersections between American domestic politics and the Vietnam War, breaking new ground in the emphasis and detail it provides on domestic political calculations and the US decision to Vietnamize the conflict. We are shown that domestic politics was not just a factor; it was the most crucial factor in explaining how, when, and why America left Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

Another of the book's great strengths is its treatment of Melvin Laird, Nixon's secretary of defense. The office of the secretary of defense has long been associated with the war in Vietnam. For many years, observers saw the Americanization of the conflict as synonymous with Robert McNamara, secretary of defense under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Some figures, like Democratic Senator Wayne Morse, even went as far as to describe the conflict as "McNamara's war."<sup>10</sup> Prentice's book further highlights the importance of this cabinet position during the Vietnam War, convincingly arguing that if America's withdrawal was anyone's it was Laird's. Laird was the Nixon administration's chief proponent of Vietnamization. Deeply sensitive to domestic political forces, a result of his extensive career in Congress, Laird embraced Vietnamization because he saw it as the only way to prevent the destruction of both the United States and the RVN. He believed that the strategy would ease the domestic crisis at home, all the while providing policymakers with the opportunity to strengthen the RVN's ability to defend itself against communist aggression. Laird was a "master of the art of political intrigue" and at "waging and winning

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<sup>8</sup> Spiro Agnew, "Television News Coverage," Address delivered in Des Moines, Iowa, 13 November 1969, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/spiroagnewtvnewscoverage.htm>. On the importance the Nixon administration attached to the media's coverage of Vietnamization, see Chester Pach, "Our Worst Enemy Seems to Be the Press': TV News, the Nixon Administration, and U.S. Troops Withdrawal from Vietnam, 1969-1973," *Diplomatic History* 34:3 (June 2010), 555-565, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2010.00869.x>.

<sup>9</sup> For work that has emphasized the impact of domestic politics on US strategy in Vietnam, see Logevall, *Choosing War*; Andrew L. Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (University Press of Kentucky, 2010); William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships, Part 1: 1945-1960* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "McNamara's War," review of *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara*, by Deborah Shapley, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 49:6 (July/August 1993), 49. In recent decades, historians have demonstrated that the phrase "McNamara's war" masks an important reality. While McNamara was an influential figure in the decision to Americanize the conflict, President Lyndon Johnson was not browbeaten into escalating the war by McNamara and other influential holdovers from the Kennedy administration; rather, Johnson escalated the war for his own reasons and despite the availability of viable alternatives. See, particularly, Fredrik Logevall, "There Ain't No Daylight': Lyndon Johnson and the Politics of Escalation," in Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 91-108.

bureaucratic battles,” all of which allowed him to determine “the pace and totality of America’s exit” from Vietnam (III, 4, 1). Prentice describes Laird’s skillful leveraging of the domestic political situation as he worked to successfully contain Nixon’s hawkish tendencies and convince him to, reluctantly, embrace a strategy of Vietnamization rather than the alternative, more escalatory options that had been tabled by figures like National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. In giving Laird such a central role, Prentice performs a valuable service, not least in reminding us that the foreign policy decisions and strategies of the Nixon administration were the preserve of more than the almost mythically powerful president and his national security adviser.<sup>11</sup>

The book’s coverage of the Laird-Kissinger battles, which were waged both in face-to-face encounters in the presence of the president and in the shadows with leaks, spying, and pre-emptive maneuvers, is an interesting component of the book and speaks to another of its critical interventions: its success in documenting the contingent nature of events. Arguing that Washington’s departure from Vietnam was not a “foreordained process,” *Unwilling to Quit* effectively illuminates the twists and turns that eventually led to Vietnamization, as US officials lurched towards an exit strategy that could satisfy their often-conflicting goals (1). Prentice reveals the varied options that lay before Nixon: military escalation in pursuit of a military victory; the continuation of the war at the levels he had inherited from the Johnson administration; a negotiated settlement with the Communists that might lead to a mutual withdrawal of both US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam; and, of course, a unilateral withdrawal that would cede primary responsibility for waging the war to the ARVN. He also showcases how Nixon went back and forth in his deliberations, at one moment seemingly seduced by the promises of escalation and the next accepting the virtues of a unilateral withdrawal as changes at home and abroad constricted his sense of what was and was not possible.

The book’s exhaustive coverage of the twists and turns of US policy can occasionally feel a little overwhelming, with each chapter journeying through the days, weeks, and months (not years) of a particular phase of the story. It is this granular attention to detail, however, that makes the book so effective in demonstrating the contingent nature of the period, evidence of just one of the ways in which focused histories like this can be of such historical value. The book excels at documenting this contingent situation in a way akin to Logevall’s two outstanding books on the Vietnam War: *Choosing War* and, its prequel, *Embers of War*.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, as well as the emphasis it places on domestic political strategizing, therefore, we might see *Unwilling to Quit* as an unofficial sequel to Logevall’s *Choosing War*. In that book, Logevall wrote of the “long 1964,” a relatively fluid eighteen-month period between August 1963 and February 1965 in which a variety of viable alternatives to Americanization were open to US policymakers.<sup>13</sup> In *Unwilling to Quit*, Prentice presents us with a moment that is equally as fascinating and open. Indeed, though Prentice does not do so, we might borrow Logevall’s phrasing to characterize the period between Lyndon Johnson’s

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<sup>11</sup> For a study that emphasizes the enormous power that Nixon and Kissinger wielded over US foreign policy, see Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (Harper Collins, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*; Logevall, *Embers of War*.

<sup>13</sup> Logevall, *Choosing War*, xvi-xix.

March 1968 announcement that he would not be seeking re-election and Nixon's November 1969 announcement of Vietnamization as the "long 1969."

Despite the book's important contribution to our understanding of US decision-making, arguably its most important intervention comes in its coverage of the RVN's attitude towards Vietnamization. *Unwilling to Quit* reveals that far from being forced to accept a US-imposed decision to extricate US forces from Vietnam, President Nguyen Van Thieu was an early supporter of the idea of de-Americanizing the conflict and, in fact, started putting serious plans together on such a strategy before American elites did in Washington. When Nixon formally laid out the strategy to Thieu, the US president found that he was preaching to the converted: Thieu expressed his fervent support for the plan. Thieu, Prentice notes, was as attentive to American domestic politics as US policymakers were, and therefore came to see de-Americanization as the best opportunity to secure the RVN's future in the face of increasing opposition to the war in the United States. Thieu, like Laird, understood that the unilateral withdrawal of American troops would give US policymakers the leverage with domestic forces at home to continue, albeit in a scaled down way and perhaps only for a limited time, the United States' support of the RVN. He and other figures in South Vietnam were also interested in the greater control that Vietnamization would give them over the conduct of the war and the RVN's own destiny, a line of thinking that was encouraged by the Thieu government's relatively rosy assessment of the political and military situation in South Vietnam. As Thieu asserted on one occasion, "We are on the winning trend" (130).

The Thieu that appears in *Unwilling to Quit*, is, like all the figures who are brought to life in the book, a three-dimensional figure, neither hero nor villain, but a complicated leader who was clear-sighted at times and blind to the war's realities at others, with aspirations of his own for Vietnam's future. Prentice makes clear that Thieu was no puppet, but rather that he bought into Vietnamization because he was convinced it best served his and his nation's goals. The book also documents the critical role that Thieu and other influential South Vietnamese figures played in the demise of the RVN, describing how Thieu's efforts to sidestep democratic processes, the failure of his regime's economic reforms, and the errors made by South Vietnamese military commanders contributed to the Communist victory. Prentice's coverage of Thieu, therefore, makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship on the RVN. It provides further evidence that the RVN was neither a tool nor a creation of the United States, and that it rather represented a legitimate form of Vietnamese political expression. It was led by operators who interpreted developments in Vietnam through their own unique lenses, sought to advance their own visions of Vietnam's future, and helped determine their nation's fate.<sup>14</sup> Much of the scholarly work on the RVN has centered on the First Vietnamese Republic and Ngo Dinh Diem, the Republic's founder and first president.<sup>15</sup> Prentice, however,

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<sup>14</sup> For work that emphasizes the artificiality and illegitimacy of the RVN, see Robert Buzzanco, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq," *Counterpunch*, 16 April 2005, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2005/04/16/how-i-learned-to-quit-worrying-and-love-vietnam-and-iraq/>; James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954–1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Knopf, 1986), 3.

<sup>15</sup> On the innovative and exciting work completed on Ngo Dinh Diem and the First Republic of Vietnam, see, for example, Miller, *Misalliance*; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*; Nu-Anh Tran, *Disunion: Anticommunist Nationalism and the Making of the Republic of Vietnam* (University of Hawaii Press, 2022); Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to*

joins a body of scholars whose work on the RVN is now taking advantage of newly available sources to complicate and deepen our understanding of the Second Vietnamese Republic, including Thieu's role in the dramatic events of that period.<sup>16</sup> Prentice's work is a shining example of the valuable insights that international approaches to the war's history continue to bring.

The book also contends that Thieu and his government “influenced... [US] disengagement” (2).<sup>17</sup> This aspect of the argument, however, is slightly less persuasive than the book's other claims. While Prentice demonstrates that RVN officials mattered in the Nixon administration's embrace of Vietnamization, a discussion of just how much they mattered would have been welcome. The book documents some of the ways that Thieu promoted Vietnamization to domestic and international audiences and reveals the energy he invested in trying to reform the RVN and produce the greater stability that was needed to make Vietnamization a more feasible project. These moves certainly shaped Nixon's turn towards Vietnamization, but, given what Prentice suggests about the enormous power of congressional and US public opinion on US strategizing, it is possible that the Nixon administration would have eventually chosen Vietnamization even with a less stable regime in Saigon.

After all, Vietnamization did seem to be the only way to square the circle of American public opinion, which rather schizophrenically expressed opposition to both the expansion of the American effort and the abandonment of South Vietnam. One could plausibly argue that decreasing stability in South Vietnam in 1969 would likely have caused a recalibration in American public opinion that might have made alternatives to Vietnamization more enticing and probable. Regardless, though, the book could have done more to zero in on the causal significance of the RVN's actions in explaining US strategy, particularly considering the enormous weight it gives to developments on the American home front. The book is on much firmer ground in emphasizing the causal impact of the actions of the Vietnamese Communists, both the NLF and the DRV, on US strategy. The Vietnamese Communists' tenacity on the battlefield, relentlessness in the face of their own considerable challenges and setbacks, and skill at the negotiating table worked to frustrate US planners. It played a part in forcing Washington into a unilateral withdrawal that, despite the concerns the Communists' expressed about Vietnamization, facilitated their eventual takeover of the country.

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*America's War in Vietnam* (University Press of Kansas, 2002); Matthew Masur, “Exhibiting Signs of Resistance: South Vietnam's Struggle for Legitimacy, 1954–1960,” *Diplomatic History* 33:2 (April 2009), 293–313, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00763.x>.

<sup>16</sup> For work on the Second Vietnamese Republic, see, for example, Simon Toner, “Imagining Taiwan: The Nixon Administration, the Developmental States, and South Vietnam's Search for Economic Viability,” *Diplomatic History* 41:4 (2017), 772–798, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhw057>; Edward Miller and Tuong Vu, “The Vietnam War as a Vietnamese War: Agency and Society in the Study of the Second Indochina War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4:3 (Fall 2009), 1–16, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2009.4.3.1>; Sean Fear, “The Ambiguous Legacy of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam's Second Republic (1967–1975),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11:1 (2016), 1–75, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/jvs.2016.11.1.1>; George J. Veith, *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam's Shattered Dreams* (Encounter Books, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> For a recent study that downplays Thieu's role, see David Anderson, *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).

There is much of value in Prentice's fluently written, deeply researched, and persuasively argued book, which should be required reading for historians of the Vietnam War. Given recent events in Afghanistan, *Unwilling to Quit* could not be more timely, as Americans try to make sense of their nation's latest evacuation from a major conflict, one that usurped the Vietnam War as America's longest war. The book also appears at a vital moment in the field of Vietnam War studies, as historians seek to quantify the respective importance of studying US and Vietnamese questions about the conflict. Prentice's work reminds us that there remains much that is still unknown about both topics, and that with the right care and skill, historians can adopt methodologies that simultaneously deepen our knowledge of US history, Vietnamese history, and the history of the wars for Vietnam.

Response by David Prentice, Oklahoma State University

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H-Diplo reviews take an enormous amount of time and effort, and I am sincerely grateful to this roundtable’s organizers and contributors. The work of Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, Brian Cuddy, and Alex Ferguson is at the cutting edge of scholarship, and in my reckoning, Pierre Asselin is the foremost scholar of the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> I could not have asked for a better roster. The same can be said for my book’s supporters, particularly those who insisted I remain “unwilling to quit” when I was ready to throw in the towel. Thanks too goes out to the magnificent George “Jay” Veith for reading and commenting on an early draft of this response. I am grateful to all of them.

Given the reviewers’ enthusiastic praise and kind words, I have opted to keep my response conversational and contemplative. Their points of doubt or disagreement—few as they were—mirror my own wanderings and reconsiderations. If *Unwilling to Quit* has one theme, it is that the Vietnam War continues to defy easy answers. It showcases the difficult decisions that Vietnamese—North and South—and American leaders faced during the long unwinding of US involvement from Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase Basha i Novosejt’s excellent musical reference, there may not be fifty ways to leave a quagmire. But agency, contingency, and the agonies of choice matter. Thus, at the heart of the book are three central questions: How, when, and why did America leave Vietnam?

To answer these questions, the manuscript that went out for peer review in 2015 and 2019 spanned 1967–1975. I agree with Basha i Novosejt that there were “antecedents of the Nixon Doctrine and Vietnamization.” In the original draft, I detailed discussions from the Lyndon Johnson administration as well as the events and figures from that period that framed the context and origins of Vietnamization, even if the decision for unilateral withdrawal had to await President Richard Nixon. I grinned as I read Ferguson’s suggestion of a “long 1969” that ran from Johnson’s March 31, 1968 speech through Nixon’s 3 November 1969 “silent majority” address; in the full version, I described it as the “long 1968.” *Unwilling to Quit* represents a fraction of the initial content, but the Johnson-era portion was removed in favor of a compact review of the Vietnamization era.

Given the birth of the Second Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the Tet Offensive and its aftershocks, the start of the Paris talks, and the 1968 US presidential election, I continue to believe Johnson’s final two years warrant a standalone book. Hopefully, the right publisher will pick up the first half of my original manuscript.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance, Aurélie Basha i Novosejt, *I Made Mistakes’: Robert McNamara’s Vietnam War Policy, 1960–1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Brian Cuddy and Fredrik Logevall, ed., *The Vietnam War in the Pacific World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Alex Ferguson, “Press Management and US Support for France in Indochina, 1950–1954,” *Diplomatic History* 42:2 (2018): 228–253; and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam’s American War* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Although the reviewers do not discuss this contribution, the book outlines Hanoi’s strategy, and its response to the US withdrawal.



Nevertheless, that diligent foregrounding and research meant that I could confidently ascribe the US exit strategy to the Nixon administration. Yet, I also knew from my research in Nixon's and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger's pre-administration papers that neither man embraced Vietnamization. Both preferred to use decisive military action to force a negotiated North Vietnamese withdrawal. Where then did Vietnamization come from?

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, in my telling, is both Vietnamization's architect and the individual most responsible for its implementation. He planned a course for the complete removal of US military personnel when the president and joint chiefs remained set on a negotiated mutual withdrawal or at least a large permanent residual force. He brought them around to his position even as he quietly set the pace of American troop reductions. Basha i Novosejt rightly raises two questions: why has he been overlooked, and did he think that Vietnamization would really work?

Her review well answers the former: "Many scholars are drawn to Nixon and Kissinger, whose kind of bookish intelligence and historical sensitivity is familiar. Men like Laird, who had fewer personality quirks and were operators who were able to maneuver around the messy world of Washington politics, are stranger beasts." As Kissinger's recent obituaries made clear, scholars like to imagine that they too could stride into the Oval Office, cut through politics and red tape, and set American foreign policy aright.<sup>3</sup> Besides, nefarious secret talks and shuttle diplomacy are far more interesting than domestic politics and bureaucratic wrangling. "Super K" with all his foibles and flair dwarfed the dome-headed Laird, who at best earned missile-shaped caricatures in the nation's newspapers. This anonymity suited Laird, who preferred results to fame.

The answer to her second question—did Laird believe Vietnamization would work—suggests another reason for his being overlooked: he presumably had doubts and was wary of being too closely tied to South Vietnam's fate. I must add a word of caution here: he was not alone in wondering if the administration's strategy could work. Scholars have unfortunately characterized Nixon's own private musings as inner truths that "prove" he accepted a decent interval between America's exit and the Republic's collapse.<sup>4</sup> His humility and willingness to reconsider his options and policies amidst a very fluid situation are perfectly normal human attributes, not evidence of darker motives.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Vietnam was not his only consideration, nor was it Laird's, since he prioritized Nixon's 1972 reelection and larger Cold War aims to a slower, costlier troop withdrawal.

But in the decisive 1968–1970 period, I find it difficult to tell whether Laird accepted the grim realities in Vietnam and proceeded with a smile or if he genuinely thought that Vietnamization could succeed.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, see David Sanger, "Henry Kissinger Is Dead at 100; Shaped the Nation's Cold War History," *New York Times*, 1 December 2023.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent analysis of Nixon's thinking (and one that deflates much of the decent interval theory), see Johannes Kadura, *The War After the War: The Struggle for Credibility during America's Exit from Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Luke Nichter's *The Year that Broke Politics: Collusion and Chaos in the Presidential Election of 1968* (Yale University Press, 2023) provides a fantastically nuanced biography of Nixon.

Regardless, he determined to make the strategy work as best he could given America's domestic context. Despite any real or apparent misgivings, both he and Nixon saw it as their duty to give the Republic a decent chance to survive.

Still, I think Laird appreciated that he could become the villain. Early on, he swore to resign after Nixon's first term, distancing himself from Vietnamization's consequences. And, he worked during and after his tenure to pin its failure on congressional Democrats.<sup>6</sup> Only in 2005, with America in another quagmire, did Laird begin to boast of his role and Vietnamization's presumed success.<sup>7</sup> Had my storyline centered on Laird, I might have leaned into the doomed-cause narrative, but he is not the only overlooked character my book rescues.

South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and his optimism as the United States embarked on Vietnamization disrupts what might have been an easy teleology of Hanoi's victory and Saigon's collapse. Ferguson's review wonderfully captures my intent: "The Thieu that appears in *Unwilling to Quit*, is, like all the figures who are brought to life in the book, a three-dimensional figure, neither hero nor villain, but a complicated leader who was clear-sighted at times and blind to the war's realities at others, with aspirations of his own for Vietnam's future." Using Vietnamese, British, Australian, Canadian, and other international sources, I document South Vietnamese military and political optimism in 1969–1970. To be clear, I capture, as Ferguson observes, the "critical role that Thieu and other influential South Vietnamese figures played in the demise of the RVN." But the evidence indicates that Vietnamization was more than face-saving propaganda.<sup>8</sup>

The RVN changed significantly since the war's Americanization and the deliberations of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, which Basha i Novosejt notes in her review. To clarify one of my muddier assertions, one which Ferguson fairly points out, Thiệu "influenced" American disengagement in that, first, the Republic embraced the strategy, thereby encouraging the White House to proceed down the long road of Vietnamization. It, or de-Americanization as Thiệu called it, could not have worked without Saigon's approval, and the RVN supported the plan for its own domestic and military reasons. Second, South Vietnam did not suddenly collapse. Had it faltered in 1968–1969, Nixon could have alternatively adopted a precipitate withdrawal or vetoed Laird's Vietnamization as premature. Instead, there was enough South Vietnamese confidence in the program and the state that they persisted through the 1972 offensive and 1973 Accords. Thus, as Cuddy and Ferguson note, I see Vietnamization as a contingent strategic choice that offered, at least through early 1970, a contingent outcome.

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<sup>6</sup> See David Prentice, "From Hawk to Dawk: Congressman Melvin Laird and the Vietnam War, 1952–1968," in Andrew Johns and Mitchell Lerner, eds., *The Cold War at Home and Abroad: Domestic Politics and US Foreign Policy since 1945* (University of Kentucky Press, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> See Melvin Laird, "Iraq: Learning the Lessons of Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005).

<sup>8</sup> For more, see David Prentice, "'Everything Depends on Us Alone': President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's Vietnamization Strategy," in Trinh Luu and Tuong Vu, eds., *Republican Vietnam, 1963–1975: War, Society, Diaspora* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2023).

That said, I am not sure that a longer, better-financed Vietnamization would have changed the result. Vietnamization exchanged Johnson's plea for more men and bombs for more time and money. Yet, the strategy failed to defeat Hanoi's implacable resolve to unite Vietnam under Communism or solve Saigon's social, political, and economic problems. The democratic and economic success of South Korea and Taiwan tempt us to imagine a better ending for the RVN, but this counterfactual ignores Vietnam's very different circumstances. A precipitate withdrawal in 1969 may seem to some the wisest option in hindsight, but it was the one alternative Washington excluded. That it did so owed much to US domestic sentiment and politics along with Nixon's (and the American public's) refusal to outright abandon an ally.

Indeed, I appreciate Ferguson's discussion of the broader historiography as I tried to strike a balance between American and Vietnamese sources and narratives. As Ferguson observes, *Unwilling to Quit* "provides a bridge between the traditional diplomatic histories of old" and the recent "international turn." Vietnamese actors are center stage throughout, and as I show, they were decisive on the war's outcome. But I felt that the origins of the US exit from Vietnam was first and foremost an American story. Vietnamization was bound up with Nixon's electoral considerations (1968 and 1972), presidential decision-making, congressional and bureaucratic battles, and an inescapable sense that public patience was running out.<sup>9</sup> As far as I am concerned, the book's highest praise came when Ferguson described it "as an unofficial sequel to Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War*."<sup>10</sup> That book was certainly my inspiration, and I am grateful for Logevall's encouragement and advice along the way. By crafting an "intermestic" narrative with the American and Vietnamese perspectives side-by-side, I hope that we can better understand the Vietnam War's conclusion even if American domestic considerations remained paramount.

Vietnamization offered Americans what they wanted: a way out other than certain defeat. "Vietnamization did seem to be the only way to square the circle of American public opinion," Ferguson summarizes, "which schizophrenically expressed opposition to both the expansion of the American effort and the abandonment of South Vietnam." Nixon, Laird, Kissinger, and even Congress responded accordingly. Drawing on the work of Leslie Gelb and Richard Betts, Cuddy suggests that Vietnamization (and America's Vietnam decision-making as a whole) "was not a bug in the US system but a feature of it." I would add that the agonies and ecstasies of mingling democracy and diplomacy are a central feature as well. The grim unwillingness of the US to quit extended from a grassroots silent majority up through the White House.

"It is not a story that provides any easy lessons," Cuddy concludes of my book, "in the end leaving the reader suspended between the post-revisionist embrace of 'complexity and contingency,' ...and the uneasy feeling that something much more fundamental than a very narrow set of leadership choices needed to

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<sup>9</sup> Ferguson reasonably criticizes me for giving short shrift to the American news media; I should have done more there, and remain hopeful Chester Pach's *The First Television War* will be published soon.

<sup>10</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1999).

change.” Given the war’s innumerable tragedies, traumas, and deaths, I feel this humble ambiguity strikes the right tone. There were no easy lessons, or “no good choices” as Nixon phrased it.”

In explaining how, when, and why the United States left Vietnam, I attempted to clarify events without oversimplifying them or falling back on tired ideological arguments. Neither approach precisely or accurately explains the competing dilemmas policymakers faced as they tried to honorably exit a war, survive the American departure, or persevere toward total victory. I have not arrived at any simple or satisfactory answer. Instead, the longer I linger over Vietnam, the more intractable the choices seem. As I suggest in *Unwilling to Quit*, it is time we stopped treating Vietnam and its dilemmas with so much haughty certainty.

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” For more on the double-edged sword of contingency and the agonies of choice in Vietnam, see Logevall, *Choosing War*, xvi-xvii, 376-382.