

# A Roundtable on David Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam*

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## Too Legit to Quit?: A Review of David L. Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit*

Steven J. Brady

In *Unwilling to Quit*, David L. Prentice addresses a significant gap in the scholarly literature on the United States and the Vietnam War. There is currently a very extensive literature on the origins of American commitment to the war in Vietnam, but the “unwinding of American involvement” has received far less attention. Davis F. Schmitz, for one, has contributed significantly to our understanding of US policy during the Nixon administration. More recently, Carolyn Woods Eisenberg has written an exhaustive study of Nixon and Kissinger’s policies in, and the impact of those policies on, Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> Still missing, however, was a focused, international history of the end of the US commitment to preserve the Saigon regime with the use of American military power. With Prentice’s latest book, we now have such a study.

Chapter 1 addresses the foreign policy legacy that Nixon inherited from Lyndon Johnson. It was “a bad inheritance,” and one “not of his making.” But, as Prentice observes, Johnson had also bequeathed to his successor some degree of flexibility. After the 1968 Tet Offensive, Johnson left open to Nixon the option to escalate or de-escalate the violence. While the incoming president had to manage a difficult situation, he could exercise a measure of control. Emphasizing a central theme of the book, Prentice notes that “America’s exit [from Indochina] was by no means foreordained in January 1969”(10). Nixon, instead, had options, even a year after Tet, especially since American public opinion was not so uniformly opposed to the war by late 1968 and defeat was not considered a viable option. Whether Nixon had a pathway to an honorable outcome remained unclear at that point.

“For Nixon,” Prentice observes, “the war and its outcome were political, strategic, and personal” (27). This complexity gave leverage to his informal political advisor and soon-to-be Defense Secretary, Melvin Laird, who wanted to use the buildup of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as an opportunity to reduce the number of American combat troops in Vietnam. Always sensitive to public opinion on the war, especially after Tet, Laird urged Nixon to seek the presidency by portraying himself as the “peace candidate.” Otherwise, Laird was convinced, “Nixon was headed for political and strategic defeat.” In addition, he wisely advised the Republican nominee to move away from his pledge to “end the war,” and instead to promise the more feasible ending of “American participation in the war” (29). His strategy paved the way for the policy that Laird would soon name “Vietnamization.” Yet Nixon, being Nixon, insisted on keeping open the possible use of air power to coerce Hanoi to negotiate, even if that step did not seem politically viable in 1968. His hands were not tied. But his

options were limited.

Chapter 2 focuses on the first months of the Nixon administration. The new president had to make actual decisions about Vietnam policy, rather than simply speaking about it, in vague terms, to voters. His major advisors disagreed on whether to de-escalate (Secretary of State William Rogers and Laird), or to increase the military pressure (Kissinger). Since the president failed to make a clear decision on the matter, “the administration went several directions at once”(31). The new Secretary of State consistently advocated for a negotiated settlement with no escalation. Laird, in fact, would be the strongest, and in the end the most successful, partisan of “de-Americanization”—which is what Nixon had called for in the 1968 campaign. But Nixon and Kissinger’s plan to concentrate policymaking in the White House and the National Security Council (NSC) “challenged Laird’s and Roger’s authority”(35). The president and the national security advisor were both highly aware of domestic and congressional opinion, so they sought a way to ratchet up the pain on Hanoi without inflaming a backlash that would force them into a precipitous withdrawal from the war. This would have meant a unilateral abandonment of Saigon, which was not an option for Nixon or Kissinger at the time. They opted instead for the decision to bomb communist sanctuaries in Cambodia in secret.

Chapter 3 addresses March-June 1969, during which Laird “sought an exit from Vietnam not beholden to the Paris talks of escalation”(53). He was willing to divorce US troop withdrawal from discussions of mutual withdrawal of US and North Vietnamese troops, and, thus, from negotiations about escalation. The withdrawal of US troops was also a goal of South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, a point of agreement which presented one less problem to the administration. And while the JCS considered ARVN unready, “domestic needs rather than military assessments motivated US reductions”(58). It was Laird who christened the new approach “Vietnamization.” In March 1969, Nixon made the decision to withdraw a token number of troops that summer. While Nixon still hoped to bring an end to the war via negotiations and ramped-up pressure, the public responded favorably to the announcement that 25,000 US troops would be heading out of South Vietnam by the end of August. This “bought Nixon time,” which was the goal. But “how much time remained uncertain”(73).

Chapter 4 covers the eventful period from June-August 1969. Kissinger by this point was fretting the possibility that the president would undermine negotiations though regularly-scheduled troops withdrawals, which undercut any leverage the US might have in Paris. Why would Hanoi give an inch when the Americans were going to leave, eventually, on their own? He thus sought to convince Nixon to “go for broke,” applying military muscle (84). Consequently, Kissinger advocated sternly for Operation Duck Hook, a “decisive military escalation designed to

compel a negotiated settlement" (87). In order to advance the operation's chances for acceptance, Laird was kept in the dark about it. Nixon, as Prentice explains, "had wearied of waiting for the other side to compromise" (93). He, like Kissinger, now favored escalation, not just to inflict pain on the North, but to signal Nixon's resolve. Hanoi, he was convinced, would get the message. However, Laird was aware of Duck Hook, even if not of its details. The scene was set for a showdown over Nixon's assent.

In Chapter 5, Prentice presents a thorough and well-sourced explanation for Nixon's ultimate decision to "postpone" Duck Hook. Aggressively championed by Kissinger, the plan called for what the National Security Council staff called "*short, sharp military blows of increasing severity*" to compel Hanoi's capitulation (112; emphasis in the original). Kissinger sold the escalation as a way to bring the communists to heel and end the deadlock within a short period of time, thus avoiding what he saw as the probability that Vietnamization would prove politically unsustainable. Initially, Nixon strongly favored Duck Hook. But increasing domestic hostility to the war, both in Congress and the general public, gave Laird the opening to press for the Vietnamization option. Given the chance to assert his opinion, the secretary made the most of it. Vietnamization—and Laird—prevailed.

The October 15 Peace Moratorium reinforced the perception that "the American public would not tolerate escalation of the war" (118). But this assumption raised two problems in the White House: Nixon wanted to avoid looking intimidated by the antiwar movement; and Kissinger still wanted to hit the North hard. This dilemma shaped Nixon's famous November 3 Silent Majority address. Kissinger had drafted a hardline ultimatum, but Nixon was too sensitive to domestic politics to accept it. The result was a mixed bag, as hawkish rhetoric was tempered by a call for "perseverance and domestic solidarity" (121).

Chapter 6 takes the story from the Silent Majority speech to spring 1970, a "period of cautious optimism in America's Vietnam War"—a time when it seemed that "Vietnamization might provide the basis for an allied victory" (124). The response to Nixon's Silent Majority address had produced the desired results, strengthening the public consensus that the US could not simply "cut and run" in South Vietnam. This support, together with the implosion of the Mobilization movement, gave Nixon some much-desired breathing room. The Vietnamization policy appeared to Nixon and Thiệu as "a psychological, political, and military winner" (130). For this reason, Prentice rejects the commonly-held conclusion that Nixon had accepted the need for a "decent interval" between US withdrawal and the collapse of Saigon. But Kissinger remained pessimistic about Vietnamization's chances for success. One key factor remained totally out of US control: "communist determination" (136). Any optimism in Washington had to be tempered by the realization that the North might simply refuse to give in, opting instead to send more troops to the South. Kissinger, therefore, wanted to increase the punishment inflicted on Hanoi, which had decided that it could overcome Vietnamization by waiting it out, ready and able to "continue the war regardless of the physical and human costs" (142).

Chapter 7 begins with Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia. Thinking that he "had the doves and the war under control," and that the military tipping point was close (143), the president took a step to push it over the edge. In doing so, he had "misread the calm at home" (144). The "incursion" into neutral Cambodia "ruined Nixon's image of careful moderation" (148). It set loose an explosion of protests, which were especially notable on numerous college campuses such as Kent State. It also ended the congressional patience that had allowed Vietnamization to proceed on Nixon's timetable. Kissinger used this opportunity to argue

for slowed troop reductions and continued bombing. But once again Laird won the day, and withdrawals continued. The ill-advised, American-supported ARVN incursion into Laos turned into a disaster, highlighting the weakness of the Republic's military. In light of PAVN's success in Laos, Hanoi prepared to launch a massive offensive. Meanwhile, Nixon's own diplomacy of détente and the opening with China seemed to undercut the very reason that the US was fighting the war. Optimism about victory in Vietnam appeared to be at an end everywhere but in Hanoi.

In his final chapter, Prentice analyzes events that led to Saigon's fall in April 1975. In 1972, Nixon had scored a hat trick, with trips to Moscow and Beijing, a breakthrough at Paris, and a massive victory in the 1972 election. But these victories notwithstanding, events that year "demonstrated how imperfect Vietnamization had been" (168). Faced with Thiệu's refusal to accept the draft Paris Accord, and Hanoi's refusal to make more significant concessions, Nixon was "frustrated with both the North and the South" (172). He chose to break the diplomatic stalemate via a massive use of force against the North with the Linebacker II bombings. Though a final accord was soon reached, Nixon still had to deal with an increasingly assertive Congress, exercising its power of the purse, to end US involvement in Vietnam, both militarily and financially. The end was now in sight for Saigon. But as Prentice points out, South Vietnam "died not from an economic collapse or internal revolution but from military defeat—the one contingency Vietnamization was supposed to prevent" (178).

In his conclusion, Prentice presents a brief discussion of the historiographical schools that have analyzed the course of the war from 1969 to 1972. Was this period a "lost opportunity" for victory or at least an earlier, negotiated end to the war? Or was it a time of "national self-deception," during which the slogan "peace with honor" simply gilded the lily of an inevitable US defeat? Prentice sees these as the wrong questions to ask. He approaches the matter from what he calls a "post-revisionist" perspective. Like the post-revisionist synthesis regarding Cold War origins, this school of thought "sees complexity and contingency" rather than "easy answers" (180). In this school of interpretation, scholars make the salient point that Nixon entered office with "no good choices" when it came to Vietnam. Any approach designed to bring a quick end to the war would be taken as a loss for the US, both domestically and internationally. It would be so, in large part, because the Saigon regime was unable to withstand the only terms of a negotiated peace that Hanoi would have accepted at that point. The president thus "chose to continue the war rather than face the hard reality of personal and national defeat" (182). Feeling constrained by public opinion that would have countenanced neither escalation nor abandonment of an ally, Nixon chose what seemed like the best of the bad options available to him.

One of Prentice's most impressive contributions is his rescuing of Melvin Laird from the wilderness of scholarly obscurity. *Unwilling to Quit* places Laird at the center of the story and action as a key decision-maker during the Nixon administration's debate about Vietnam War policy. He emerges, in fact, as the only member of Nixon's cabinet who could match, and sometimes excel, Henry Kissinger in the art of bureaucratic politics. He favored Vietnamization when both Nixon and Kissinger wanted, instead, to escalate the violence, and he was central to Nixon's decision to stress Vietnamization over bellicose ultimatums in the Silent Majority speech. He championed the long game instead of the "Big Play" initially favored by Nixon. Laird prevailed. The victory was not a minor one given the complexity of the problem and the many voices vying for attention.

It is a standard practice among academic book reviewers to raise critical questions, even in positive reviews. In this vein, I raise two issues. The first, briefly, is one of

narrative chronology. Prentice says that Nixon decided to Vietnamize the war early in his administration. But he also seems to argue that Nixon and Kissinger sought victory in the war, the apparent opposite of Vietnamization. It was thus unclear to me what Prentice was asserting on this question of timing.

Additionally, Prentice may well take too seriously the Nixon-Kissinger call for “peace with honor,” a framework that is overly generous toward Nixon. He asserts that the issue of liquidating American commitment to the war with honor was “the question that would consume [Nixon’s] administration” (30). But was it? A strong case can be made that by late 1971, the administration was not trying to achieve “peace with honor,” whatever that meant to the president at that point, but rather he was attempting to disguise the fact that the US had already been defeated.<sup>2</sup> If an honorable exit meant leaving the US allies in Saigon with a good chance of survival—the irreducible minimum of any honorable settlement—then Nixon’s diplomacy with the Thieu government in January 1973 suggested that something much less than honorable was happening. The South Vietnamese president understood that the ceasefire-in-place agreed to by Kissinger at Paris made his country’s chances of survival extremely remote. So too did Nixon.<sup>3</sup> Since Prentice titles all his chapters after popular songs, a novelty that works better for some than for others, I offer one of my own: Prentice might have said that Nixon was “too legit to quit.” It is to his credit that he did not.

These criticisms aside, *Unwilling to Quit* is an impressively, indeed exceptionally, well-researched book. Its re-centering of Laird makes a vital contribution to our understanding of policymaking in the Nixon administration. Whether the go-to phrase “Nixon-Kissinger policy” should be replaced by “Nixon-Kissinger-Laird” I will leave to other scholars to hash out. But the case for the change has now been made, and it has been made well.

Notes:

1. David F. Schmitz, *Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2014); Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, *Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

2. On this, see Schmitz, 132-133.

3. Eisenberg, 493-494.

## Review of David L. Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit*

Carolyn Eisenberg

In spring 1968, millions of Americans had reason to think the end of the Vietnam War was in sight. The mounting expense, the growing casualty list of U.S. soldiers, and most importantly, the shock of the Tet Offensive had radically shifted the domestic landscape. Lyndon Johnson’s decision to institute a partial bombing halt, to open negotiations with Hanoi and to terminate his own candidacy for president, all pointed in this direction.

The election of Richard Nixon, a seasoned Cold Warrior, to the White House might have signalled a retreat from diplomacy. However, throughout his campaign, Nixon maintained he had a “secret plan for peace.” And while he offered no specifics, voters could reasonably assume this was his goal.

As a Republican, Nixon had the option to blame his Democratic predecessors for the Vietnam failure and rapidly terminate the project and bring the war to an end. Instead, he pursued the war for his entire first term, with more than 20,000 American soldiers killed, 100,000 injured, 2-3 million Asians dead, and the lands of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam dangerously scarred until this day.

Why did this happen and how? Drawing upon the

vast collection of declassified documents, historian David Prentice ably explores this still challenging subject. In his clear, sharply argued new book, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam*, he maintains that beneath the twists and turns of policy, during this period, there was a consistent strategy pursued by the administration. Most historical writing on this period centers on the role of President Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Prentice adds a third participant to this narrative, namely Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird. In his view, Laird’s proposed strategy of “Vietnamization” was adopted early on, and slowly but continuously implemented over the course of four years.

This approach was publicly articulated by the President, on numerous occasions: his plan was to withdraw American troops in increasing increments, while providing the Army of South Vietnam with the resources to confidently replace them. As explained by Laird, by following this course, the Vietnam War could be extended, while maintaining popular consent. If Americans could see that casualty rates were declining, and increased numbers of troop were coming home, they would be less impatient with its continuation.

Laird’s view contradicted Henry Kissinger’s own belief that increased violence was necessary to compel Hanoi to accept a favorable peace agreement. It was also at odds with Nixon’s preference for escalation. Indeed, left to his own devices, Nixon might have stood by Kissinger. However, as Prentice demonstrates, Laird’s ace-in-the-hole was the state of public opinion. As a seasoned politician, the Defense Secretary was keenly aware of the political protest that was sweeping the country. In his view, it was only a matter of time before the antiwar movement prevailed. He reminded Nixon that a disillusioned Congress could eventually cut off the funds.

By late summer 1969, Nixon veered close to Kissinger’s approach—signaling Hanoi that absent a more flexible stance, as of November 1, his administration was prepared to ratchet up its military effort. For months, under the rubric of Duck Hook, military officials and National Security staff crafted various schemes to damage North Vietnam. Under consideration were an array of brutal actions:

U.S. air and sea forces would devastate the country’s military and economic infrastructure while quarantining it with mines and a naval blockade. Rail lines, power stations, airports, North Vietnam’s factories, storage depots, naval vessels and even the levees that protected North Vietnam’s rice paddies and villages from devastating floods were potential targets (110).

However, as the deadline for decision approached, the military and civilian personnel had difficulty settling on a specific plan.

That October, antiwar sentiment in the country was on the rise. Most ominous from the White House standpoint was the adherence of politically moderate people to the cause of peace. Citing the work of historian Melvin Small, Prentice registers the importance of the October 15 Moratorium Day, in which an estimated two million people, across the country, participated in an array of peaceful antiwar activities. Favorable press coverage amplified their message. Even before that exact day, Nixon was mindful of the rising dissent and clearly understood that Duck Hook or its equivalent would generate a fierce public backlash.

With this as backdrop, Nixon labored furiously on a public address scheduled for November 3. Prentice offers a new interpretation of this “Silent Majority” speech. The oration is usually seen as an especially skillful effort by Nixon to undercut future moratoriums and to ramp up support for the war. And while it served both aims, it

also signified his acceptance of Secretary Laird's strategic vision over that of Kissinger. In other words, "Barring a diplomatic breakthrough, Vietnamization would remain Administration policy" for the next three years (123). While the subtitle of this book is "*The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam*," most of the narrative is focused on the events of 1969. At the end of that year, Laird's strategy of Vietnamization looked promising. As predicted, the emphasis on troop withdrawals was popular and gave Nixon additional room to maneuver. It was also helpful that this approach had the approval of General Creighton Abrams, U.S. troop commander in South Vietnam, as well as South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

It is perhaps surprising that Thiệu was an early advocate of "Vietnamization." Prentice explains that even before Nixon took office the South Vietnamese leader was acutely aware of the discontent rising in America. He believed that the removal of thousands of American soldiers would calm this down. And if this step was accompanied by substantial economic and military aid, it would enable his armed forces to assume control of the war. At some later point, Thiệu's attitude would change, but it initially gave Nixon breathing room to shore up his domestic support.

As described by Prentice, the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front believed that Nixon had made a shrewd move, which would quiet protest in the United States, enabling him to extend the time that the United States remained in the war. They did not consider this a "camouflaged retreat" (158). Indeed, as of early 1970, their position in the South had become precarious, the morale of their troops had declined, and they had limited ability to launch a new offensive. However, these leaders and many cadres had been fighting their whole lives for the unification of their country, and there was no thought of giving up. "If new optimism typified the mood in Washington and Saigon, then renewed determination, rather than new pessimism, characterized Hanoi" (142).

During the next three years, despite fluctuations on the battlefield, the Nixon Administration followed the Vietnamization concept. The removal of U.S. troops remained an imperative, as was the increased aid to the Saigon government. By November 1972, there were few American combat soldiers left in the South. While the U.S. numbers might have dwindled, at the time of the Paris Peace agreement, there were an estimated 140,000 North Vietnamese soldiers inside South Vietnam. Prospects that the regime could survive, absent American ground troops, were greatly diminished. This was not the endgame that Nixon officials had imagined.

What went wrong? Prentice is never explicit about his own attitude towards Vietnamization. However, in his early chapters, there is an implication that if properly implemented, Laird's strategy might have preserved South Vietnam's independence. But both Nixon and Thiệu became over-confident and took a series of foolhardy steps which undermined the entire process of bolstering the South Vietnamese military with decreasing U.S. combat troops. "Each president sought short-term solutions to the complex problems created by U.S. troop withdrawals and North Vietnamese obduracy," Prentice writes. Their actions "alienated the constituencies they needed to sustain support over the long haul" (143).

In Thiệu's case, the ongoing American support strengthened his authoritarian bent. During this period, he imposed harsh economic measures, circumvented the National Assembly, cracked down on political dissenters, and engineered a farcical national election, thus becoming "the dictator that American doves had long held him to be" (156).

On the U.S. side, there were also major blunders. Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia turned into "an error of 'Epic Proportions,'" despite warnings by Secretary Laird and

others. While the President's November speech had been effective, this dramatic expansion of the war re-awakened mass protest. From the campuses to the halls of Congress, dissent was rampant.

Other calamities followed. Lam Son 719, an effort by the South Vietnamese military to march into Laos and block the movement of North Vietnamese troops and material into South Vietnam, proved especially demoralizing. Beginning in February 1971, Saigon troops were expected to reach the crossroads town of Tchepone and to remain there until April. Yet faced with a surprising number of enemy troops, and huge casualties, most never arrived. And those who were helicoptered in quickly abandoned their position on orders from Saigon.

Despite these setbacks, Prentice argues that Vietnamization continued to be Nixon's policy until the Paris Agreement, when U.S. withdrawal was complete, and the prisoners released. Yet the outcome was different than Laird and other advocates had imagined: the North Vietnamese and their National Liberation Front (NLF) allies were in a strengthened position, while domestic pressure in the United States restricted the flow of aid.

Historians will find Prentice's discussion of the 1969-70 period especially valuable. He is certainly correct in highlighting the role of Secretary Laird, and the significance of troop withdrawals. At the time, many in the antiwar movement tended to minimize the importance of that decision. In subsequent decades, historians have often focused on Nixon's escalations, while downplaying the steady reduction of troops. Yet the Vietnamization strategy was a direct response to pressure from protestors and members of Congress. At times this external influence constrained Henry Kissinger's predilection for increased military force. But not entirely. While "Vietnamization" was a central feature of Nixon's strategy, Prentice is on questionable ground in making it the only strategy that Nixon pursued. The abandonment of Duck Hook was indeed a pivotal event, but it did not signify the administration's rejection of escalation. From the bombing of Cambodia and Laos in 1969, to the bombing of North and South Vietnam in the Spring of 1972, to the Christmas Bombing in December 1972, this was a continuing thread of policy. If domestic pressure to end the war continued, it was because the administration's actions, in addition to the invasion of Cambodia, were morally abhorrent.

In this larger story, the role of Melvin Laird is more complicated than Prentice allows. At the outset, the Secretary may have truly believed that the strategy of Vietnamization could save South Vietnam. But this idea was increasingly disproved. Indeed, his transcendent goal was to get as many American troops home as quickly as possible, *regardless* of the situation on the ground. He was personally opposed to the invasion of Cambodia, and to many of Nixon's subsequent escalations. Yet whatever his private objections, he dutifully trekked up to Capitol Hill to defend the administration's actions. In this way, he was able to keep his job, and to remain effective in reducing the harm to Americans.

Of less consequence to Laird and his colleagues was the suffering U.S. violence inflicted on the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Prentice has kept a steady focus on policymaking in Washington. Yet by ignoring the results of U.S. action in these places, his account gives more sympathy to Nixon and his colleagues than they deserve. The familiar anecdote of President Nixon on the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial, attempting to communicate with student protestors, seems less consequential than the devastation inflicted on Cambodia.

These concerns notwithstanding, David Prentice has done an admirable job of illuminating a complex story. There is much to learn from this well-written, engaging, and carefully documented book.

David L. Prentice, *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam*

Robert K. Brigham

*Unwilling to Quit* is a welcomed addition to the scholarship on the Nixon administration's Vietnam War policies. Nixon came into office wanting to de-Americanize the war. He also wanted to apply military pressure against North Vietnam to force Hanoi's leadership into making concessions at the nascent Paris peace talks. He hadn't worked out the formula exactly, but he knew he had to change the geometry in Vietnam to get an honorable peace. Nixon was desperate to devote more attention to what he considered more important foreign policy challenges, namely relations with the Soviet Union and China. Luckily for Nixon, he chose Melvin Laird, a long-time Republican member of the House of Representatives from Wisconsin, to be his secretary of defense.

Laird was an inspired choice, and David L. Prentice is one of the few scholars who takes this appointment seriously. In the first months of the administration, Laird promoted what he called "Vietnamization," the phased withdrawal of U.S. troops and the handing over of major combat responsibilities to the South Vietnamese armed forces. To make Vietnamization work, Laird argued that the plan also required a significant realignment of military budgets and hardware. The United States would build up the South Vietnamese air force and its long-range bombing capabilities to compensate for the reduced number of U.S. troops. Laird believed that he might get another five years of war funding out of Congress if Nixon accepted these changes. The war at this point was all about time. Laird thought Vietnamization bought South Vietnam just enough time to allow Saigon to build up its military, political, and economic capacities to stand up to the communists on their own.

Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor, stood in Laird's way. Kissinger hated everything about Laird's plan. He thought it deprived U.S. negotiators in Paris of their most valuable asset, coercive diplomacy. How could the Nixon administration pressure Hanoi militarily during a unilateral U.S. troop withdrawal? Kissinger was also quite upset about being bested by Laird. Prentice offers a compelling look at the political intrigue inside the Nixon administration, concluding that the rivalry between Laird and Kissinger was intense and somewhat destructive. Nixon's secretary of state, William Rogers, understood that it was best to stay out of Nixon's way when it came to the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy. This added fuel to the contest between Laird and Kissinger because Rogers was out of the picture when it came to influencing the president.

Initially, Nixon sided with Laird. Vietnamization could produce tangible results almost immediately, the president concluded, and that was precisely what he needed. Prentice's handling of the decision-making inside the White House is superb. With flourish, he shares the strategic thinking among Nixon's chief foreign policy team. He also makes clear that Nixon was in charge even though Laird announced Vietnamization publicly before Nixon was ready. Over the course of Vietnamization, U.S. troop withdrawals generally happened according to Laird's timetable. He had a keen sense of what Congress could tolerate and what the American people demanded. Few others in the administration had their finger on the pulse of public opinion as firmly as Laird.

What makes *Unwilling to Quit* so valuable, however, is its sophisticated telling of Saigon's reaction to Vietnamization. Prentice carves out unique territory in the scholarship by arguing that Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, South Vietnam's President,

understood U.S. politics better than most previous studies have suggested. Prentice argues that Thiệu anticipated and even encouraged Vietnamization as a way to mature the state apparatus in South Vietnam. Furthermore, Thiệu envisioned an economic Vietnamization, the slow but deliberate acceptance of fiscal independence and responsibility in Saigon. In short, Prentice concludes, Thiệu initially embraced Vietnamization because he had to, but he then turned it into an asset to help South Vietnam develop and stand on its own.

In its first year, Vietnamization did what Laird and Nixon had intended it to do. The American public and Congress responded favorably to U.S. troop withdrawals, and Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech of November 1969 firmly established Vietnamization as the way that the war would end. It was not going to be the easy path, Nixon told the nation, but it was "the right way" (123). By taking this long and difficult road, the United States offered South Vietnam its best chance for survival. The United States would not withdraw precipitously, Nixon pledged, but would stand by the Saigon government as it grew strong enough to defend its own freedom.

Many South Vietnamese, for the first time since the war began, "looked to a brighter tomorrow" (132). Indeed, the major success of Vietnamization rested with the South Vietnamese, according to Prentice. Saigon had weathered the first U.S. troop withdrawals, had increased its troop strength, had recaptured territory lost during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and had extended security in the countryside. The Thiệu government even instituted some long-needed changes, like a major land reform campaign launched in March 1970. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency agreed that Saigon had made significant gains in the first year of Vietnamization, concluding that South Vietnam was "stronger militarily and politically today than ever before" (136).

Hanoi was worried about Vietnamization's success too. Lê Duẩn, the Communist Party's Secretary General and a long-time proponent of military victory in South Vietnam, conceded that U.S. troop reductions would prolong American staying power. He had to further prepare his people for the possibility of a forever war. Exhaustion was always a concern.

By April 1970, Vietnamization was seen by all sides as a limited success. Primarily, Prentice argues, it bought Saigon time, and it created the circumstances for South Vietnam to stand on its own. What happened then? Why did the war end in defeat for South Vietnam following a unilateral American withdrawal?

Prentice correctly concludes that there were three main factors leading to South Vietnam's defeat. First, U.S. airpower masked the overall weakness of the South Vietnamese armed forces. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) acquitted itself quite well in Cambodia and during the Communist 1972 Easter Offensive, in both cases scoring significant military victories. But in both of these instances, U.S. air power made all the difference. In 1971, the ARVN performed poorly during Operation Lam Son 719 in Laos when it had to fight without U.S. troops or advisers present. Half of all South Vietnamese forces were captured or killed, highlighting the army's deficiencies. In the end, Prentice concludes, South Vietnam was not able to defend itself against a relentless enemy.

Second, the Thiệu government failed to make meaningful political and economic reforms quickly enough to secure the public's support. The 1971 South Vietnamese election showcased the government's anti-democratic tendencies. Thiệu kept opposition candidates from joining the presidential race, effectively making him the only choice. This soured much of the South Vietnamese public toward Thiệu's autocratic rule and undermined his legitimacy. Thiệu also had a rocky relationship with the

National Assembly, which handicapped his reform efforts. Furthermore, South Vietnam never gained control of its economy. On Thiệu's watch, inflation became rampant. Prentice attributes most of South Vietnam's woes to its inability to right its economic ship.

Finally, Prentice believes that Nixon and Kissinger supported policies that unwittingly undermined Vietnamization's success. Nixon never relinquished his initial desire to use American firepower to force Hanoi into making concessions at the Paris negotiations. Coercive diplomacy was always at the forefront of Kissinger's Vietnam War thinking. During 1969, Nixon and Kissinger had discussed a plan—Operation Duck Hook—that would increase bombing raids against North Vietnam, mine Haiphong's harbor, and target the intricate Red River dike system. They thought military escalation would force Hanoi to bend the knee. Nixon put Duck Hook on the back burner when he embraced Laird's Vietnamization plan in the spring of 1969, but the use of military force was always on the president's mind.

In April 1970, when the United States launched an incursion into neutral Cambodia to destroy North Vietnamese military outposts and munitions there, Nixon unknowingly sped up the Vietnam clock. Prentice argues that the president undermined his own policy by bringing the war back into full congressional view after presenting a successful strategy to assuage growing anxiety about Vietnam. Nixon's Cambodia policy led to several bipartisan congressional efforts to force a complete U.S. withdrawal from the region. Though none passed both houses of congress initially, they did limit what the president could do in Laos and Cambodia and drew attention to the ticking clock, which measured America's dwindling support for continued military involvement.

Prentice offers an analysis of alternatives that Nixon could have considered and implemented. After Vietnamization's success of 1969 and early 1970, Nixon could have spent his political capital on something other than an expansion of the war. Prentice argues that Nixon should have worked more willingly with Congress to get the military and economic aid South Vietnam needed. Instead, the president chose to keep Congress at bay, hoping that the White House could take political advantage of troop withdrawal announcements to expand the war behind the scenes. Nixon always had his eye on domestic politics, so he knew the risks of revealing his actual policies.

Prentice also believes that Nixon instinctively did not want to abandon "the possibility of escalation and coercive diplomacy" (185). Nixon never gave up on the belief—shared with Kissinger—that North Vietnam must have a breaking point that he could find and exploit. What was it about Nixon and Kissinger that they stubbornly clung to the efficacy of military intimidation against North Vietnam? Prentice could have explored this issue in more detail.

I have a few minor quibbles—and one major one—with this otherwise excellent book.

The construction of historiographical schools of thought—orthodox, revisionist, post-revisionist—is a good way to prepare students for comprehensive exams, but the practice has limited use beyond that. Prentice calls himself a post-revisionist and argues, "where others see easy answers, the post-revisionists see complexity and contingency" (180). This is far too reductionist to be useful. Furthermore, instead of complexity and contingency, *Unwilling to Quit* often avoids major historiographical arguments. For example, scholars continue to debate whether the Christmas bombings (Linebacker II) forced concessions in Hanoi and drove Lê Đức Thọ back to the

bargaining table or if the attacks on North Vietnam were simply a fig leaf for an agreement that was so flawed it was essentially a U.S. surrender document. Prentice enters the fray with a half-hearted statement, writing "Linebacker II brought all sides back to the diplomatic table, resulting in the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973" (173).

There are times in the narrative where I wished Prentice had slowed down a bit and analyzed events more fully. This is especially true when dealing with Nixon and the Congress. Nixon's desire to chart his own path in Vietnam, free of congressional meddling, is such an important part of this outstanding book that I wish Prentice gave us more details from the House and Senate. The bipartisan nature of the efforts to end the war are such an interesting chapter in this history, and we could have benefited from a deeper treatment of them. Readers need to know, for example, that the United States was losing about two hundred military personnel per week in Vietnam at the beginning of the Nixon administration, and this situation took a heavy toll on public opinion and, therefore, Congress.

We also could have benefited from a deeper conversation about the link between military campaigns in Vietnam and the process of Vietnamization. One of the reasons Vietnamization was successful in 1969 was due to the redeployment of the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division from I Corps to III Corps, the area around Saigon and northwest to the Cambodian border. This move led to a dramatic decrease in communist attacks on Saigon. American and South Vietnamese troops also inflicted heavy casualties on communist forces without raising public ire. This gave Saigon time to breath, time to implement training programs, and time to focus on manpower and logistical needs. Ironically, it also drove North Vietnamese forces deeper inside Cambodia, leading to the 1969 bombing raids and the 1970 incursion that Prentice argues was one of the contributing factors to Vietnamization's ultimate failure.

Now to the major quibble. Prentice has sanitized Nixon to the point that he is almost unrecognizable. Throughout the book, Nixon is shown as a rational actor who never lets his insecurities and emotions mix with policy decisions. Every decision he makes, in this telling, is carefully calculated for its strategic and tactical value. Every decision is made with a steady hand and steely-eyed realism. Prentice does conclude that, "Watergate and the war ran together," and that "Watergate considerably reduced the president's power and options further still," (175) but there is not much consideration of Nixon's emotions or personality beyond that.

It may be true, as some Nixon scholars claim, that Nixon was no trickier than his predecessors. But the war and Watergate took a personal toll on Nixon, and readers should see the impact of this pressure on the man and his thinking. Did Nixon's near obsession with leaks and perceived slights have a role in the administration's Vietnam policies? Did Nixon's scandal undo the promises he and Kissinger made to Thiệu about Vietnamization and U.S. support? Did Watergate erode support for Vietnamization in Congress, even among Republicans? How much of Nixon's unwillingness to work with Congress was because of his personal make-up? Readers need to have the full Nixon on the page to assess the man and his policies.

These comments aside, *Unwilling to Quit* is a significant addition to the scholarship on the Vietnam War. Utilizing the latest source material from the United States and archives in Vietnam, *Unwilling to Quit* is a must-read for historians of U.S. foreign relations because it covers so much new ground on an important topic.

**Review of David L. Prentice. *Unwilling to Quit: The Long Unwinding of American Involvement in Vietnam.***

*Hang Le-Tormala*

The recent passing of Henry Kissinger once again reminded the world of a war that deeply divided the United States, one that consumed “the best and the brightest” Americans (to borrow historian David Halberstam’s words) serving various administrations of the world power at the time. As one of the most controversial conflicts in U.S. history, the Vietnam War has inspired generations of scholars to examine its politics and the decision-makers involved. The robust body of literature on the topic prompts the question: Is there anything new to say about the Vietnam War? What else have we not learned about the U.S. policies of escalation and de-escalation or the ending of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam? David L. Prentice’s beautifully written monograph will surprise those who believe that the full story of the Vietnam War has been told. Presenting President Richard Nixon’s “Vietnamization” phase of the conflict in Indochina in a new light, *Unwilling to Quit* scrutinizes the political context and the individuals who influenced the president’s de-escalation policy in the final years of the war in Vietnam. Prentice persuasively presents three major arguments. First, he holds that it was Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, not Nixon, who pursued and persisted in the policy of Vietnamization, gradually turning combat duties over to the South Vietnamese army, which is often perceived as a pivotal move and particular characteristic of the Nixon Administration. Second, Prentice focuses on the period of 1969-1971 as the defining years of Nixon’s shift in his Vietnam policy. What happened after 1971, he argues, amounts to the consequences, not the causes of that transformation. Third, Prentice presents Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, President of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), as a major influence on U.S. policy, playing a significant and active role in convincing Nixon that Vietnamization was plausible. Mining the newly declassified documents and international archives, Prentice sheds new light on the much-debated topic.

Chapter One familiarizes readers with a brief history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam and the stalemate that Nixon inherited. Facing a resolute enemy and a war-weary home front, Nixon wrestled with an honorable exit from a quagmire that had entrenched previous administrations. He wanted to end the war, but he certainly did not want to be the first U.S. president to lose a war. His predecessor, President Lyndon B. Johnson, had attempted to negotiate with Hanoi and accepted the National Liberation Front (NLF), North Vietnam’s ally in the South, in the peace talks that followed the Tet Offensive in 1968. President Thiệu, however, rejected the idea of a coalition government for South Vietnam that would include the NLF. Frustrated by Johnson and concerned about U.S. domestic tension, which posed a threat to U.S. funding for his war effort, he wanted to reduce American direct involvement and strengthen his army. Thiệu started to advocate for de-Americanization in mid-1968 in the hopes of pacifying antiwar Americans, which in turn would help maintain popular and congressional support for his country. Thiệu’s initiative was supported by General Creighton Williams Abrams, Jr. (Commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam), Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, and Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, but Johnson discarded the idea of unilateral withdrawal. Johnson wanted North Vietnamese forces out of the South as well, but he did not believe that Thiệu’s plan paved the way to victory for South Vietnam. Likewise, Nixon never proposed unilateral withdrawal of U.S. troops, either. De-Americanization, renamed “Vietnamization” in 1969 by Melvin Laird, therefore, was an idea inherited, not created

by the Nixon Administration, asserts Prentice.

Chapter Two describes the Nixon-Kissinger alliance, resulting in an escalation of the violence in Vietnam and its neighboring countries. Winning the election by a landslide in 1968, Nixon entered the White House with his campaign promise “Peace with Honor,” but without a plan to accomplish it. “Goaded by [National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger”, Prentice writes, Nixon intended to escalate the war to bring North Vietnam to its knees. Melvin Laird opposed escalation (32). However, he was by no means a dove. As Prentice pinpoints, Laird shared the same goals as Nixon: to prevent South Vietnam from crumbling under communist expansion and to secure Nixon’s reelection. The difference lay in their approaches. On the one hand, Kissinger advocated coercive diplomacy for a negotiated victory, in which he hoped to bring the communist leaders to peace talks by increasing military pressure on Hanoi. Laird, on the other hand, concerned about domestic unrest and congressional constraint, sought to prolong the war, buying time to strengthen South Vietnam’s military, restore public support, and secure continued U.S. funding for an ultimate victory. While understanding Laird’s rationale for de-escalation, Nixon found Kissinger’s “great power diplomacy” more appealing as it fit perfectly with his “Madman Theory.” The “mad pair” of Nixon-Kissinger even reformed the National Security Council to empower the White House in shaping foreign policies (39). As Prentice indicates, the alliance was so strong that Nixon and Kissinger would try to circumvent both secretaries of State and Defense in pursuing coercive diplomacy.

Chapter Three focuses on Laird’s efforts to sell Vietnamization to Nixon and the president’s dilemma of whether to agree with the Secretary of Defense or to listen to the National Security Advisor. While the idea of Vietnamization was not new, the key point in 1969 was to change Johnson’s plan of bilateral withdrawal to unilateral withdrawal. Laird gained significant support from President Thiệu and General Abrams for this strategy. For them, troop withdrawal did not mean abandonment. It served, instead, as a means to soothe the American public and congressional antiwar sentiments. Once political support was restored, they believed that financial assistance, which South Vietnam desperately needed to build up its military and economy, would be secured. Then the republic would be able to fight off communist expansion. Laird saw the urgent need to ease domestic tensions and warned the president that he had but “a brief grace period,” (57). Understanding the threat of the ticking time bomb, Nixon agreed to a token unilateral withdrawal to regain support and buy time for military escalation from Thiệu. In the meantime, Laird, knowing the president’s hidden plan of escalating airpower, executed his own secret agenda. The Secretary of Defense leaked to the media information about withdrawal before the president announced it, ignored a presidential order on escalating bombing campaigns, and reduced air operations in Vietnam altogether. He also proposed a draft lottery. To Nixon’s frustration, it seemed he had no option but to follow Laird’s path.

Chapter Four contextualizes Nixon’s decision making in the entanglement of international politics. After announcing U.S. troop withdrawal from Indochina, Nixon took a further step, stating that he was going to apply the same strategy to the U.S. global commitment – emboldening local forces so that they could take up the primary responsibility of containing communism. The so-called Nixon Doctrine was an attempt to balance “America’s needs with its global obligations” (74). Prentice offers a keen insight into how other international leaders viewed and responded to Nixon’s moves. Bolstered by progress in his regime’s capability to control more territory, Thiệu continued to push for Vietnamization. Leaders of North Vietnam and the NLF were skeptical. They believed

Vietnamization was a propaganda ploy and anticipated a U.S. military escalation as “a wild beast in its death throes” (81). The North Vietnamese Communist Party’s First Secretary, Lê Duẩn, employed the strategy of “talking while fighting” until achieving the reunification of Vietnam (82). Furthermore, the Sino-Soviet split added complications to the matter. While the Soviet Union wanted North Vietnam to negotiate peace, China pushed for resolute fighting. The U.S. desire to achieve détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China also had an impact on its Vietnam policy.

Chapter Five details the critical moment when Nixon abandoned the strategy of Duck Hook and switched to Vietnamization between September and November 1969. Codenamed “Pruning Knife,” Duck Hook was Kissinger’s design to launch “a savage, decisive blow against North Vietnam” (105) should the latter refuse to bow to him at the negotiating table by November 1st. According to Prentice, the bond of the “mad pair” was most manifested in the Duck Hook planning process as Nixon gave “explicit instructions” to exclude Laird and other cabinet members from the affair (106). Laird, however, in his own way, learned about Duck Hook anyway. Believing “Duck Hook would be too costly, financially and politically,” he worked relentlessly to prevent the military onslaught (111). As Prentice proves, Laird understood the real risk of challenging public opinion in a democracy. Eventually, Nixon changed his mind in October and officially announced Vietnamization in November.

Chapter Six analyzes Nixon’s “Great silent majority” – those who did not oppose the war, or at least at that point remained “unwilling to quit.” Under Prentice’s scrutiny, there was a glimmering hope of success for both the United States and South Vietnam, among leadership and ordinary citizens, between November 1969 and March 1970. Nixon’s and Thiệu’s rating improved. So did optimism for South Vietnam’s progress. As the author aptly points out, it was because most people perceived Vietnamization as good politics underpinned by domestic pressure. Few realized that it was fundamentally a military strategy to buy time in regaining internal and external support, to strengthen the ally, and ultimately to resume military operations to defeat the enemy. Soon the “progress” reported from South Vietnam proved to be hollow.

Chapter Seven investigates how Vietnamization fell apart. Overconfidence and miscalculations are common formulae for failures. As the glimmering hope in late 1969 and early 1970 became magnified, U.S. and South Vietnamese leadership felt emboldened, so emboldened that they believed it was time to act. Nixon and Kissinger thought they could bypass Congress and resume escalation. “They were wrong,” Prentice fittingly remarks (144). When MACV (US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) proposed invasions of Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971, respectively, to destroy North Vietnam’s southward march, Thiệu and Kissinger readily agreed. Thiệu was positive his army would succeed, provided that U.S. air support was at his disposal. Kissinger saw an opportunity to resume escalation and slow down withdrawal. While confident in his “Great Silent Majority,” Nixon also wanted to win the non-silent minority’s votes. Thus, he ordered the invasions while speeding up withdrawal. The military operations were disastrous, revealing South Vietnam’s unreadiness and reigniting antiwar protests. Adding salt to injuries, the year 1971 also witnessed Thiệu’s dubious reelection and the release of the Pentagon Papers. These two events significantly diminished public trust in both the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments. The “light at the end of the tunnel” was about to be extinguished.

Chapter Eight examines the three tests that Vietnamization had to undergo: politics, military, and diplomacy. Of the three, the political test brought victory

for Nixon. The fact that he won reelection with a landslide in 1972 indicated Vietnamization worked beautifully, as Laird had anticipated in 1969. The glory would not last long, however. Militarily, it exposed South Vietnam’s weaknesses and its dependence on the United States’ generous, long-term support. Unfortunately, by 1972, the South Vietnam republic’s survival seemed much less important to the United States. The American exit became the top priority. Hanoi, on the other hand, awaited an opportunity. Without U.S. firepower to challenge them, reunifying the country under communism was no longer out of reach. Nevertheless, until that day, North Vietnam would suffer from U.S. operations Linebacker and Linebacker II, the bombing campaigns that unleashed “unprecedented U.S. firepower” (171). The signing of the Paris Accords of 1973 officially ended the United States’ involvement in Southeast Asia, as the end of the Republic of Vietnam loomed large on the horizon.

Through David L. Prentice’s skillful dissection, he displays the details of a complex picture of Vietnamization. He masterfully walks readers through the labyrinth of individual personalities, personal pursuits, national interests, and international relations – all factors that are involved in a major policy shift in an effort to achieve the same outcomes. Prentice reminds us that personality matters, even in high politics. One might find it amusing seeing Laird outwit Kissinger (33-34) or outmaneuver Nixon (62). The title, “Unwilling to Quit,” aptly applies to all sides: the Nixon administration and a significant portion of the American population, Thiệu’s regime, and Lê Duẩn’s forces.

*Unwilling to Quit* is a fascinating read for anyone interested in the politics of the Vietnam War, conflict or peace studies, and diplomatic history. The historian’s poetic writing style brings high politics to life. Undergraduates of upper levels and graduate students will benefit from the rich content and analytical approach of the book. My only minor suggestion is to add chapter descriptions to the introduction in future editions. Nevertheless, the monograph serves as an excellent example of comprehensive and resourceful research, especially for graduate students or novice scholars. Not only did Prentice take advantage of newly declassified documents in the United States and Vietnam, he also creatively drew upon sources from seemingly unrelated archives in Australia, England, and Canada. Furthermore, the author’s interview with the key character, Melvin Laird, is another precious gift to readers.

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

*Sandra Scanlon*

David Prentice offers a compelling narrative of the final years of American warmaking in Vietnam, presenting what can justly be described as the definitive account of the policymaking process during the first years of the administration of President Richard Nixon. Extensively exploring newly declassified materials from the Nixon White House, Prentice deftly articulates the variety of military and diplomatic options—and indeed the diversity of courses pursued—during the first year of the administration. Ultimately, he convincingly argues, the president accepted the only viable long-term option—de-Americanization of a war that the United States could not anticipate ending by other acceptable means. Yet, as the title of the monograph makes clear, the White House, most Americans, and many Vietnamese ‘remained unwilling to quit.’ There was no single decision making process that defined the fates of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam. Even as the Nixon administration determined



to withdraw its own troops in piecemeal fashion, Prentice makes clear that there was no “teleological winding down of America’s war in Vietnam.” The policy that became known as Vietnamization was a process continually contingent on military, diplomatic, and political factors, while the “temptation to terminate the conflict with military force remained strong” (1). While Vietnamization became the process by which the United States slowly ended its military presence, and ultimately its military commitments, to South Vietnam, it did not in itself define either the terms or means by which the United States would exit Southeast Asia. Prentice’s work thereby directly challenges accounts of the Nixon administration that have argued that the inauguration of Vietnamization in mid-1970 represented a turning point at which the president had a clear vision as to the outcome of the war. Key policymakers—Melvin Laird and Henry Kissinger most especially—saw diverse opportunities and threats stemming from phased troop withdrawals. In the long process of taking American personnel out of Southeast Asia, policies were influenced more by misplaced optimism than an assumption that the United States would ultimately cut and run or secure no more than a decent interval between the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the collapse of the South Vietnamese regime.

At the heart of Prentice’s work is a call to recognize the pivotal role of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in determining U.S. policy in Vietnam during the first two years of the administration. Without a clearly defined plan to end the war, the Nixon administration in 1969 considered a range of military and diplomatic options. As previous scholars—most notably Jeffrey Kimball—have argued, the president’s focus on a military solution during 1969 was paramount, and he favored military escalation at key points until 1973.<sup>1</sup> Prentice does not challenge this perspective, but he stresses that earlier accounts have failed to acknowledge Laird’s significance during 1969 or consider the reasons why his policy preference ultimately formed the bedrock on which U.S. policy was based. By 1971, Prentice concludes, the idea that the U.S. military would leave Vietnam regardless of the diplomatic outcome trumped any other policy option. Laird’s commitment to removing American servicemen was based firmly on domestic considerations, notwithstanding the view shared by many in Washington that America’s interminable war in Vietnam was damaging its global credibility. Laird “was no dove” (53) and he shared the goal of ensuring South Vietnam’s long-term security that drove National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s militaristic approach during 1969. Kissinger’s position was more favored by Nixon during 1969, however, Laird “quietly and methodically prepared to set America on a different course out of Vietnam” (52). Warning Nixon that the public would not tolerate the continuation of the war at its current level, Laird sought a way to buy time for South Vietnam. As such, he set about pursuing a withdrawal strategy that would decouple troop withdrawals from a diplomatic solution or an abrupt ending of the war. He “pursued a policy of Vietnamization to achieve the same ends as Nixon and Kissinger, but his strategy would prolong the war to enable South Vietnamese self-defense in the absence of a peace settlement” (53). Indeed, it was Laird’s lack of faith in a diplomatic solution that conditioned his view that South Vietnam’s survival largely depended on endless war, a war that, at least politically, U.S. personnel could not fight. Prentice sees Vietnamization as Laird’s means of dealing with a domestic political problem—a means of buying time in the face of growing antiwar activism that would reach an inevitable conclusion—while maintaining a commitment to securing an elusive victory in Vietnam.

As much as Prentice methodically sets out the means by which Laird secured his policy objectives between 1969 and 1971, he attributes far greater weight to the agency of the government of the Republic of Vietnam, and particularly

President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, than earlier scholars of the Nixon administration. Building on scholarship that looks at the war from Vietnamese perspectives, Prentice details Thiệu’s early embrace of incremental U.S. troop withdrawals and his increasing influence on defining the parameters of U.S. policy in both principle and practice.<sup>2</sup> Utilizing sources from British, Australian, and Canadian diplomatic archives, Prentice paints a picture of a leader at once committed to his state’s survival through the demonstration of independence and the securing of U.S. military and economic assistance, and yet still incapable of truly understanding the limitations of his government’s domestic authority or military capabilities. Gauging international perceptions of Thiệu provides important context to American perspectives, but the work of engaging with a wider range of Vietnamese sources remains to be done. Still, the emphasis on Thiệu recontextualizes American decision making. Believing that U.S. withdrawal was inevitable given the growth of mainstream antiwar activism and Congressional challenges to the White House, Thiệu pushed for reduced American military personnel in exchange for guarantees of economic support and military assistance. The nature of such military assistance remained ambiguous, and it is possible that, during the development of Vietnamization, Thiệu expected the United States to continue its air support indefinitely. In many respects, Thiệu saw Vietnamization the same way that many American conservatives did — as an opportunity to unfetter South Vietnam from the constraints associated with limited war.<sup>3</sup> While American policymakers may have had similar ambitions, Prentice makes clear that even as Laird was determined to keep withdrawals at pace, the administration had no set plan for such withdrawals, the timings of which were supposedly contingent on diplomatic progress; but they were increasingly determined by the rate of Congressional opposition to the war and Nixon’s pessimism about domestic political circumstances.

Thiệu’s agency was indirect but helped negatively shape both American military perspectives about the capacity of South Vietnamese forces to stand alone, and Congressional attitudes about the desirability of allying with the South Vietnamese regime at all. Thiệu’s authoritarian approach was devastatingly revealed by his 1971 election, and along with the military disaster of Lam Son 719—which revealed that U.S. and Vietnamese expectations about American air support for ARVN ground operations was unsound—these factors vitalized Congressional calls for setting a firm date for U.S. withdrawal. Increasing challenges to the pace of Nixon’s withdrawal strategy, and White House fears that amendments setting out clear dates for withdrawal would further constrain U.S. diplomatic leverage, enhanced Nixon’s commitment to pressuring Hanoi via short, intensive bombing campaigns. As such, Prentice dissects the turbulence underpinning decision making, and the interplay between political, military, and diplomatic objectives. While previous scholars have certainly paid considerable attention to Nixon’s worldview and political calculations, Prentice considers the broader domestic context. In this sense, Nixon is less an architect than a player in a multifaceted, highly contingent environment. The domestic context became “an ever-present third adviser, always shaping Nixon’s thinking on Vietnam. Kissinger and Laird gave him options; the polls, press, and Congress gave demands” (40).

Rather than look for clear rationality in policy decisions, *Unwilling to Quit* reflects on the function of delusion. By early 1970, Nixon and Thiệu’s “new optimism had become hubris” and their actions during 1970 and 1971 did much to undermine Vietnamization (143). Prentice notes that when Nixon visited the United Kingdom in 1969, British officials “did not interpret Midway or the Guam speech as the beginning of an American sellout. They saw Vietnamization

as Nixon's attempt to 'buy time' at home while pursuing the military and diplomatic measures necessary to achieve a settlement" (95). The British may have shared Nixon's hopes for Vietnamization, hopes that at times were also held by policymakers including Laird and Kissinger. But both men recognized that Vietnamization was unlikely to bring peace, and they clearly anticipated that war would either continue or resume once U.S. ground forces departed. If Kissinger was more realistic about the likelihood of South Vietnam's inability to survive a post-withdrawal assault from North Vietnam, Laird early on disputed warnings from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While they concluded in 1969 that South Vietnam could manage domestic attacks from the National Liberation Front, the JCS rejected hopes that South Vietnamese forces would be able to withstand an invasion from North Vietnam. "Laird," Prentice notes, "disagreed and ordered the JCS to prepare and equip the South Vietnamese to handle both regular and guerilla forces" (105). If Laird was clear-sighted about the domestic constraints on continuing the war, he too was subject to unwarranted optimism about the ability of the United States to control the post-withdrawal situation in Vietnam. As 1972 revealed both North Vietnam's intransigence and its military fragilities, Prentice describes how Nixon's fear that "Vietnamization was a hollow strategy" coexisted with his continued determination to use bombardment to avoid quitting either the war or the "political winner" that withdrawals promised (168). Nixon, along with Thiệu and Lê Duẩn, had little hope of avoiding war after the Accords went into effect, but "Nixon and Kissinger believed the agreement would justify continued U.S. assistance to South Vietnam and intervention with airpower should North Vietnam violate it, though they hoped that deterrence and great power diplomacy would make such violence unnecessary" (174). If not quite in the realm of wishful thinking, such optimism ignored the reality that military assistance required Congressional support for both Nixon and Thiệu, which in 1973 could have been deemed unlikely by any informed observer and which became entirely untenable once Watergate consumed the political agenda.

Analyses of the Nixon White House based on access to declassified administration sources has formed a major part of the war's historiography for upwards of twenty-five years. In parts, *Unwilling to Quit* covers familiar territory, particularly as it describes the final year of the war. This is in part because Prentice's clear objective was to demonstrate Laird's considerable influence in overcoming Kissinger's hostility to troop withdrawals and credit his success by 1971 in putting the United States on an irrevocable path to withdrawal. Laird seems to leave the scene for much of the book's final chapters, which is somewhat jarring.

Thiệu remains a clear presence, but further studies—utilizing Vietnamese sources—will need to tell the story of his government's final days. *Unwilling to Quit* leaves the reader—as no previous study of Nixon's Vietnam policy has done—with the inescapable view that Laird's withdrawal strategy overcame all other alternatives because domestic realities undercut any goal of avoiding catastrophe for South Vietnam. The outcome for the Republic of Vietnam was neither foreordained nor secured by Nixon's policies, and the pace of withdrawals remained contingent on events in Vietnam and Paris. Scholars will debate the extent to which U.S. support could have sustained South Vietnam in the long-term, but Prentice ably elucidates that that withdrawal in 1973 did not indicate a conscious embrace of a decent interval or a firm plan to return to an air war against North Vietnam. The only outcome set in stone was the U.S. exit from its ground war in Southeast Asia, and the only clear goals were those centered on the political wellbeing of American leaders, who were vulnerable to criticism from the American public.

Notes:

1. For divergent opinions on the Nixon administration's Vietnam policy and its expectations for peace and U.S. military policies in a post-settlement Southeast Asia, see Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); and Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018).
2. See Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Simon Toner, "Imagining Taiwan: The Nixon Administration, the Developmental States, and South Vietnam's Search for Economic Viability, 1969-1975," *Diplomatic History* 41:4 (September 2017): 772-798; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
3. See Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

**Editor's note:** *Passport* offered Dr. Prentice the opportunity to respond to the roundtable reviews on his book. He responded as follows: "Rather than read and respond to the participants, the author has elected to spend time with his family." Given that he has left academia, *Passport* understands and accepts Dr. Prentice's decision. *AJ*