



# FIGHTING, NEGOTIATING, LAUGHING: THE USE OF HUMOR IN THE VIETNAM WAR

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The scene: A conference room at a private villa in the outskirts of Paris, at Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne. Diplomatic delegations of North Vietnam and the United States are meeting to finalize a peace agreement aimed at ending the war in Vietnam.

Date and Time: October 10, 1972, 4.00 p.m. to 9.55 p.m.

Representing North Vietnam: Le Duc Tho, Special Advisor of the North Vietnamese Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks; Xuan Thuy, Chief North Vietnamese Delegate to the Paris Peace Talks; Phan Hien, Advisor to the North Vietnamese Delegation; an Interpreter, and two Note-takers.

Representing the United States: Henry Kissinger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; Major General Alexander M. Haig, Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; Winston Lord, National Security Staff; another National Security Staff; an Interpreter, and a Note-taker.

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The two sides are hammering out the details of a draft peace agreement. In the middle of the session, Le Duc Tho requests Henry Kissinger to include a promise within the draft agreement that the United States would not continue its military involvement in Vietnam after the peace agreement was signed. Tho also asks Kissinger to delete a clause that would allow the United States to keep its troops in Vietnam for sixty days after the ceasefire came into effect. Kissinger replies: “You won’t let us interfere for sixty days more?” The participants break into laughter. After the laughter subsides, Tho retorts: “So you want to continue to interfere for sixty days more?” Kissinger responds: “It is a habit that is so hard to break.” There is more laughter, and Tho brings the proceedings back to seriousness with the comment: “once the war is ended this should not be so.”<sup>1</sup>

In this encounter, both sides made light of the extremely serious issue of US troop withdrawal. Yet, Tho used the opportunity to resist Kissinger’s desire to prolong the US intervention for sixty days. The encounter encapsulated the central issue underlying the entire war in Vietnam—that of US military interventions overseas, which, according to Kissinger, had become a “habit” that was difficult to break.

The negotiators used humor in order to achieve several objectives during the Paris peace talks, to break the ice and build rapport. But the North Vietnamese also used humor to demonstrate their resistance to US power and raise Vietnamese morale during the talks from 1970–1972. They employed humor in two significant ways—during negotiations with the United States, and in works of popular art such as cartoons and caricatures—at a time when bombs were falling over North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or the DRV). Although many humorous exchanges were initiated by Kissinger in Paris, the North Vietnamese often cracked jokes and always were quick with witty repartee. The fact that Kissinger delivered most of the laugh lines had a lot to do with Kissinger’s gregarious personality and his Western education. But once DRV negotiators warmed to the US side they were much freer with their jokes. Kissinger’s humor was crafted to serve various purposes: Sometimes his humor exhibited US diplomatic and military power, and at other times the jokes recognized the battlefield reality that the North Vietnamese could outlast US forces in Vietnam. The participants at peace talks tailored the content of their jokes to mirror diplomatic and military realities on the ground in Vietnam and the gathering maelstrom in US domestic

1. Memorandum of Conversation [from here: Memcon], Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, at Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, 10 October 1972 (Nixon Presidential Materials Project [NPMP], National Security Council [NSC] Files, Henry A. Kissinger [HAK] Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, National Archives and Records Administration [NARA], College Park, MD).

politics (where the war was hurting both the electability of politicians that supported the war as well as the US economy). The historical record shows that there were moments in the peace talks when both sides took friendly digs at each other and engaged in good-natured banter. They fed off the other's jokes, and attempted to have the last laugh.

This article constructs a new narrative showing the innovative and reflexive ways in which the North Vietnamese used humor as a tool to resist US power, as well as boost morale and break the ice at peace talks. The fact that they could laugh at all was surprising to US officials, because communists were not supposed to have a sense of humor, certainly not under bombardment and adversity. North-Vietnamese humor was the response of a national liberation struggle talking back to the power center. The margins challenged authority figures of the colonial metropole in ways that demonstrated their use of the liberating power of humor. DRV negotiators used humor to resist US policies and proposals, release tension, raise morale, reduce the aggressiveness of the other side, and signal symbolic victory over the enemy. They also deployed the use of nervous laughter, informed by a sense of fear about the resumption or continuation of massive aerial bombardments of their country. The bombings were a one-sided affair, and there was no way the DRV could retaliate in equal measure. At times DRV officials used humor as a tool to enable the United States to save face, especially when Kissinger acquiesced in Hanoi's insistence on keeping DRV troops in the south. Diplomatic bargaining power frequently swung from one side to the other and then back again as battlefield realities changed.

The peace talks occurred against the backdrop of North-Vietnamese fears of being cheated during negotiations. DRV officials frequently took an uncompromising stance in their official negotiations with the US government because they did not believe they could trust Western diplomacy after years of fruitless talks with France immediately after the Second World War. At the Geneva Conference of 1954, DRV Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Van Dong already complained that while the United States talked about peace and unity in Vietnam, the actions of the United States at Geneva were "merely a ruse" designed to slow progress and prevent a peaceful settlement. In 1966, the CIA regarded the North-Vietnamese fear of being cheated as a major obstacle to a diplomatic resolution to the war. The agency reported that DRV leaders had "lumped the Americans with the French as dishonest Westerners."<sup>2</sup> After 1965, the Politburo of the Lao Dong party (the

2. CIA Intelligence Memo, "Vietnamese Communist views on the US negotiating position," 3 October 1966, National Security File, Country File, Vietnam, NVN leadership attitudes, 3L[3], 11/68-1/69, Box 86, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library [LBJ Library], Austin, Texas.

Vietnam Workers' Party, which was the ruling party of the DRV) resolved never to repeat the mistake of betraying the revolution by again negotiating an end to the war, and instead aimed to win the war through a huge national military effort. As a result, the party did not rely on formal diplomacy to deal with the United States; instead, it simply demanded the withdrawal of US forces.<sup>3</sup> So, when Kissinger proposed that US forces should stay on in Vietnam for sixty days after a cease-fire came into effect, the North Vietnamese counter question, "You want to continue to interfere for sixty days *more*," should be read in the context of the historical DRV fear of being cheated during negotiations.

In the absence of peace talks, the two sides waged war. Soon after he became president, Lyndon Johnson was not interested in serious talks because he feared that negotiations would antagonize the leaders of South Vietnam. To force Hanoi to end its support of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF), the US Air Force conducted Operation Rolling Thunder from February 1965 to November 1968. The bombing campaign was designed to destroy DRV infrastructure (railways, roads, bridges, water transport, petroleum storage, electrical plants, and radar and communications facilities) that enabled North Vietnam to send troops and supplies to South Vietnam. Rolling Thunder also targeted the DRV's only steel mill in Thai Nguyen, and a cement plant.<sup>4</sup> The bombing gave Hanoi an opportunity to seize the moral high ground by inviting teams of anti-war activists from the United States, Europe, Japan, and Asia to investigate instances of US war crimes against women and children, or the wholesale obliteration of schools and hospitals. The bombardment of North Vietnam shocked many Americans, and Hanoi acquired political capital by pointing out that the Vietnamese could hardly be expected to take President Johnson's offer seriously to negotiate while he was bombing the DRV. Domestic and foreign criticism of Rolling Thunder began two months after the start of the bombings and US allies abroad urged negotiations.<sup>5</sup> Travelers to North Vietnam such as the American peace activist David Dellinger and anti-war activists from Women Strike for Peace were dismayed by the huge toll the bombardment took on North-Vietnamese women

3. Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement*, Chapel Hill, NC: U. of North Carolina P., 2002), 3–4.
4. James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder: Understanding Policy and Program Failure*, Chapel Hill, NC: U. of North Carolina P., 1980, 40–1; and Ronald B. Frankum, *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964–1975*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 20.
5. Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam*, Berkeley, CA: U. of California P., 1989, 93.

and children.<sup>6</sup> North-Vietnamese leaders cited civilian deaths as evidence that Johnson's peace offer was insincere. The backlash against Rolling Thunder gave the Lao Dong party an opportunity to reconsider its diplomatic options. The Thirteenth Plenum of the Lao Dong Central Committee, which met in Hanoi in late January 1967, set three foreign policy goals for the DRV: gain support from the international community in order to turn world opinion against the US intervention, combine fighting with negotiation, and "bring into play our aggregate strength to defeat the United States."<sup>7</sup> The DRV realized that it could not defeat its powerful adversary in a conventional war, and that it needed to win small battlefield victories to bolster its position during peace talks. North Vietnamese diplomat Luu Van Loi, a member of the DRV delegation to the Paris Peace Talks in 1972–73, emphasized the importance of coordinating military efforts with diplomacy, because "[w]e can only seize on the negotiation table what we have seized on the battlefield."<sup>8</sup> The humor during peace negotiations was a natural occurrence, paralleling the shift from a strategy of winning the war on the battlefield to winning the war on the diplomatic table.

The two sides were pushed towards peace talks because the Tet Offensive of January 1968 had produced devastating outcomes for both sides. On the one hand, DRV plans to spark an uprising in the south did not materialize, and the Tet Offensive resulted in the destruction of the NLF as a fighting force. On the other hand, the claim of the administration of President Lyndon Johnson that "victory is just around the corner" was proven to be false because US forces were taken by surprise. The Tet offensive resulted in a massive blow to the US image of righteous invincibility worldwide, and a public uproar against the war from outraged Americans. The two sides entered peace talks when it became obvious that neither could win a decisive military victory. In the early days of the peace talks, it was never clear who had the diplomatic upper hand.

6. Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1998, 75, 77.
7. Luu Van Loi, *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy, 1945–1995*, Hanoi: The Gioi, 2006, 183; and "A Brief Chronology of the Communist Party of Vietnam," in *75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 1930–2005: A Selection of Documents from Nine Party Congresses*, Hanoi: The Gioi, 2005, 1281.
8. See Luu Van Loi, *Fifty Years*, 183–4. Loi's views are significant because of his long association with DRV diplomacy. He served as an assistant to the Vietnamese foreign minister from 1970–78, as a member of the DRV delegation to the Paris Peace Talks in 1972–73, and as deputy head of the DRV military delegation in the four-party joint commission (including the DRV, the United States, the Republic of Vietnam, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam) in Saigon in 1973.

The DRV was acutely aware that US peaceful coexistence policy had improved its relations with both Moscow and Beijing and now aimed to isolate Hanoi by convincing the two communist giants to reduce military and economic aid to North Vietnam. Yet, fear of Chinese intervention restrained US policymakers. They were reluctant to send US troops above the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel to invade the north because they believed that China might retaliate by sending Chinese forces to fight them. President Johnson had openly voiced these worries, and President Nixon had chosen to confuse the North Vietnamese by sending signals to them about his Madman Strategy, which was crafted to convince the DRV that Nixon was inherently unstable and might use the nuclear bomb against them.

Hanoi, meanwhile, doubted that the Chinese would carry out their threats to retaliate if US forces did cross the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. DRV leaders also believed that the Soviet Union was undermining the Vietnamese Revolution by carrying on its own rapprochement with the United States. As for China, the DRV leaders were aware of Beijing's tacit agreement with the United States that both sides would exercise restraint.<sup>9</sup> In April 1965, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai had sent a message to the Johnson administration saying that China would not provoke a war against the United States. Zhou stated, "We Chinese mean what we say," but warned that "China is prepared."<sup>10</sup>

Several insightful studies of the Paris Peace Talks have been published, but none of them describe how DRV and US negotiators created a friendly atmosphere by using humor to lower tensions, nor have they explored the use of humor as a DRV instrument of resistance to US power.<sup>11</sup> Two exceptions are Larry Berman's *No*

9. See "Document: Comrade B on the Plot of the Reactionary Chinese Clique against Vietnam," in Priscilla Roberts, ed., *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World beyond Asia*, Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford UP, 2006, 477.

10. Discussion between Zhou Enlai and Ayub Khan, 2 April 1965, "The Vietnam (Indochina) War(s)," Cold War International History Project, Virtual Archive, available at: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/digital-archive>, accessed 10 December 2008.

11. Excellent accounts of the negotiations in Paris leading to the signing of the peace agreement include, Asselin, *A Bitter Peace*; Gareth Porter, *A Peace Denied: The United States, Vietnam, and the Peace Agreement*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1975; Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002; Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003; Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002; Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004; Allan E. Goodman, *The Lost Peace: America's Search for a Negotiated Settlement of the Vietnam War*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978; and Nguyen Phu Duc, *The Viet-Nam Peace Negotiations: Saigon's Side of the Story*, Christiansburg, VA: Dalley Book Service, 2005.

*Peace, No Honor*, which cites a few instances of humor but does not analyze them because the author's intention was to explore the peace talks through a traditional diplomatic-history approach, and the Kalbs' *Kissinger*, which makes brief mention of humor.<sup>12</sup> Studies of President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger, as well as their memoirs, do not devote much attention to the use of humor in negotiations.<sup>13</sup> Humor has gone unnoticed, too, because the Kissinger-Thuy/Tho talks were kept secret and out of the glare of the media. In most studies, US and DRV negotiators appear angry and abusive; they hector each other on their respective country's righteous policies while denouncing the policies of the other side. There seems to be little that the two sides can agree on, and readers are left with the impression that DRV and US negotiators barely tolerated each other.<sup>14</sup>

Although the North Vietnamese showed that they were capable of humor, their predicament was not a laughing matter. To anti-war activists in the United States and Europe, the North Vietnamese appeared the weaker combatant locked in an endless war with a military and economic superpower. Still, the DRV did not wholly lack power, for Hanoi was well provisioned by its communist allies. Moscow gave surface-to-air missile batteries that shot down US planes, while Beijing provided trucks and rifles. Economic aid from its allies helped Hanoi survive devastating US bombing raids on its fledgling factories.<sup>15</sup> However, these supplies could not match the superior armaments and economic aid the United States gave to South Vietnam.

By examining, for the first time, the use of humor in non-humorous Vietnamese settings, this article opens a new avenue to analyze US-DRV negotiations critically. The new evidence makes clear that the Vietnam War was not only about aerial bombardment and guerrilla warfare. It was also about keeping up morale: The North Vietnamese showed their steadfast resilience in their ability to laugh at the

12. Marvin Kalb and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1974, 396; and Berman, *No Peace*.
13. See Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007, 188. Dallek depicts how DRV negotiator Le Duc Tho laughed at Kissinger's jokes, but Dallek does not examine humor as a strategy. See as well Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 442; Jeremi Suri, *Henry Kissinger and the American Century* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2007, 229; Jussi Hanhimaki, *The Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004; Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, New York: Summit, 1983; and Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.
14. See Robert D. Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger: Doctor of Diplomacy*, New York: Columbia UP, 1989, 30.
15. Harish C. Mehta, "Soviet Biscuit Factories and Chinese Financial Grants: North Vietnam's Economic Diplomacy in 1967 and 1968," *Diplomatic History* 2, 2012, 301–35.

enemy, both the United States and its client state in South Vietnam, and at themselves. US officials wrongly presumed that communists lacked a sense of humor. The North-Vietnamese negotiators in Paris showed that their humor was spontaneous, for they did not need to check back with Hanoi before cracking a joke, while they excelled in the art of repartee. In these ways, this article helps improve scholarly understanding of this important episode in the broader history of the Vietnam War. The principal contribution of this article is new evidence from the papers of President Nixon, and the communist party newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, which shows US and North Vietnamese diplomats engaging each other with a great deal of wit. Studies of humor are important because they enable historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and cultural-studies scholars to analyze where humor has been instrumental in mobilizing sympathy and support, and the role of humor in helping release tension during a prolonged struggle. This article makes a contribution to a growing body of historical literature that studies humor and laughter in order to understand social relations and the use of power of various types—class, racial, ethnic, and gendered.<sup>16</sup> First, this study briefly surveys how scholars have constructed the history of laughter and how they have theorized the role of laughter itself. Then it examines the production of humor in the communist societies of Eastern Europe and Vietnam. Finally, the article presents and analyzes historical evidence of laughter during DRV-US peace talks, and also in the works of Vietnamese cartoonists that found US policies funny in many different ways.

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The scholarly study of laughter has a rich—and unfunny—history. Literary historian and theorist Manfred Pfister has argued that laughter arises from two fronts—from the power center toward the marginalized and from the margins as an attempt to challenge and subvert established orthodoxies, authorities, and hierarchies.<sup>17</sup> Although the relationship between colonized people and the colo-

16. See Sandra Swart, “‘The Terrible Laughter of the Afrikaner’—Towards a Social History of Humor,” *Journal of Social History* 4, 2009, 889–917; Melvin E. Page, “‘With Jannie in the Jungle’: European Humor in an East African Campaign,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 3, 1981, 466–81; and Christina Kotchemidova, “From Good Cheer to ‘Drive-By Smiling’: A Social History of Cheerfulness,” *Journal of Social History* 1, 2005), 5–37.

17. Manfred Pfister, “Introduction: A History of English Laughter,” in Manfred Pfister, ed. *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002, v–x: vi–vii.



nizer is not humorous, it does include settings where humor is used to release tension, reduce aggression, and raise morale. Freud described jokes as a symbolic victory over an enemy, a triumph that is confirmed by the laughter that is evoked in the audience.<sup>18</sup> The historian Daniel Wickberg argues that the possession of a sense of humor denotes a “capacity for self-adjustment, to expand and contract at will, to navigate the rigid demands of a bureaucratic order by being inherently flexible.”<sup>19</sup> The use of humor within the rigid parameters of the Paris Peace Talks indicates that it was possible for an embattled society such as Vietnam to laugh. The sociologist Antonin Obrdlik has shown that the “gallows humor” occurring in precarious or dangerous situations is indicative of the strength or morale of an oppressed people.<sup>20</sup> Obrdlik argues that in countries that are oppressed by invaders, the use of humor raises the morale of the oppressed people. As the DRV came under devastating US bombardment, the attempts of its negotiators and artists at laughter represented a sort of “gallows humor.” In general, humor used in a conflict situation takes the form of irony, satire, sarcasm, burlesque, caricature, and parody.<sup>21</sup> In Vietnam, these forms of humor were on display in North Vietnamese face-to-face exchanges with US officials and in Vietnamese artworks.

Scholars have formulated theories of laughter explaining why people laugh.<sup>22</sup> The Superiority Theory formulated by Plato and Aristotle posits that laughter is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over others. The Incongruity Theory, whose proponents were the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, holds that laughter is triggered by something unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate. The Relief Theory, which emerged in the work of the British philosopher Herbert Spencer, suggests that laughter is used in order to release nervous energy. The scholar John Morreall has argued that societies employ humor for its liberating power, arguing that in a comic mode, people say, think, and do things that are forbidden, and “polite joking challenges authority

18. Virginia Richter, “Laughter and Aggression: Desire and Derision in a Postcolonial Context,” in Susanne Reichl *et al.*, eds, *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005, 61–72: 63.

19. Daniel Wickberg, *The Senses of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998, 114.

20. Antonin Obrdlik, “Gallows Humor—A Sociological Phenomenon,” *American Journal of Sociology* 5, 1941, 709–716.

21. Gary Alan Fine, “Sociological Approaches to the Study of Humor,” in Paul E. McGhee *et al.*, eds, *Handbook of Humor Research*, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983, 159–81: 174.

22. See John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Albany, NY: SUNY P., 1983, 4, 15, 20; and Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, London: Routledge, 2002, 3.

figures and traditional ways of thinking and acting.”<sup>23</sup> Freud offered his overarching explanation of the workings of humor: By making the enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, an embattled people achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming the enemy.<sup>24</sup> By laughing out loud, the third person, who is merely a distant observer, stands witness to the humor.

Barry Sanders, a scholar of the history of ideas, posits that while theories of laughter have come from those in power, the laughs have come “from those who have occupied the underbelly of history, from those who have remained as historically anonymous as their laughs.”<sup>25</sup> Sanders argues that “power, finally, has nothing to say to laughter—it remains dumb in the silent sense, dumbfounded in the weakest way.” And, when power responds, it can only resort to torture, imprisonment, and even death. While the “peasant uses his breath to resist, authorities use their pens to react—with verdicts, edicts, indictments, punishment through long-term sentences.”<sup>26</sup> Sanders theorizes that “the architecture of laughter clearly reflects its inherent concern with power relationships.”<sup>27</sup>

In these ways laughter empowers the underprivileged and resists the powerful. The laughter of North-Vietnamese peace negotiators manifested in various types: the laugh of triumph when they bested an opponent; laughter resulting from the use of comic devices such as exaggeration (ridiculing imperialist values) and understatement (refusing to take those values seriously); and the laugh which falls into the same category as the sigh of relief because it marks the end of a period of suspense. The scholar Carlos Gonzales has argued that “humor is healing and can help people” to cope with grief, and, unsurprisingly, such humor can also be encountered among the North Vietnamese.<sup>28</sup>

23. See John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 56; and Nicholas Garland, “Political Cartooning,” in John Durant *et al.*, eds, *Laughing Matters: A Serious Look at Humour*, New York: Longman, 1988, 75–89: 76.

24. As noted in Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1996, 4–5.

25. Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, Boston, MA: Beacon, 1995, xi.

26. *Ibid.*, 2–6.

27. *Ibid.*, 81.

28. Dr. Carlos Gonzales, University of Arizona, in delivering a native Indian blessing at a memorial service on 12 January 2011, honoring the victims of the Tucson, AZ, shooting that killed six people as well as wounding thirteen others including Congresswoman Gabrielle Gifford on 8 January of that year.

At the same time, North-Vietnamese cartoonists mocked various aspects of US policy: the US strategy of talking peace while bombing North Vietnam, Washington's desire to create a non-communist state in South Vietnam which was effectively a dictatorship, the US financial aid program in South Vietnam which Saigon officials used to enrich themselves, and the failure of the Nixon Doctrine to develop the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) into a viable fighting force that could hold its own against the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN, or the North Vietnamese army) without the assistance of the US military.

While the Vietnamese demonstrated their prowess by creating humorous works, some US leaders and academics mistakenly believed that humour was possible only in democratic societies. President Dwight D. Eisenhower thought that it was impossible for communist societies to possess a sense of humor. In 1958, Eisenhower told the graduating class of the US Naval Academy that in a "free people," a sense of humor went hand in hand with independence of thought, and that "a communist is not permitted" this kind of liberty.<sup>29</sup> Eisenhower's remarks were symptomatic. During the Cold War, humor was connected in the Western world even more closely with liberal democracy, and framed in sharp contrast to the totalitarianism of the communist world. In the mid-1950s, a US sociology textbook on the Cold War argued that an appeal to the sense of humor was an effective anti-communist propaganda device because the communists took themselves too seriously.<sup>30</sup> This perception was erroneous because citizens of the communist countries of Eastern Europe and Asia demonstrated a capacity to laugh at the failure of communist states to meet their needs. There is plenty of evidence of communist-bloc humor in Eastern Europe in the form of books published abroad prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.<sup>31</sup> After the end of the Cold War, the East-European tradition of joke-telling has been kept alive by Western publishers who have continued to produce books on communist humor.<sup>32</sup>

29. Wickberg, *Senses of Humor*, 199, 204.

30. John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz, *Modern Society: An Introduction to Social Science*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1954, 620.

31. For communist-bloc humor, see John Kolasky, compiler, *Look Comrade—The People are Laughing: Underground Wit, Satire, and Humour from Behind the Iron Curtain*, Toronto: Peter Martin, 1972; and Algis Ruksenas, *Is That You Laughing Comrade: The World's Best Russian (Underground Jokes)*, Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1986.

32. Also see C. Banc and Alan Dundes, compilers, *You Call This Living: A Collection of East European Political Jokes*, Athens, GA: U. of Georgia P., 1990; and Ben Lewis, compiler, *Hammer & Tickle: The History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2008.

But this was of course mainly subversive humor. Pro-communist humor did exist, however, of which the most graphic evidence is the Soviet satirical journal *Krokodil*, published from 1922 until 2002, which at its height was printed in more than 6 million copies.<sup>33</sup>

However, scholars have neglected the study of the Vietnamese sense of humor in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times. While it is true that most of the communist humor comes from Eastern Europe, humor did exist in communist North Vietnam. Vietnamese humor is richly represented in Vietnamese anticolonial novels, poems, and political cartoons. In the village of Dong Ho, northeast of Hanoi, researchers have found a traditional print dating back to the precolonial period that depicts, in cartoon-style, a story of mice (representing peasants) taking gifts to a landlord. Other prints criticize polygamy.<sup>34</sup> These findings show that the Vietnamese have traditionally employed sketches and drawings as a form of protest art.

The revolutionary leader Ho Chi Minh drew cartoons for leftist newspapers in Paris in the 1920s in order to inform Vietnamese expatriates about French policies and gain the support of French communists in the national-liberation struggle of the Indochinese countries.<sup>35</sup> A Ho Chi Minh cartoon shows a fat Frenchman sitting on a rickshaw being pulled by an emaciated Vietnamese man.<sup>36</sup> The Vietnamese playwright and essayist Vu Trong Phung used satire and wit in *Ky Nghe Lay Tay* (*The Industry of Marrying Europeans*), a documentary narrative he wrote in 1934 about Vietnamese women who married European Legionnaire soldiers in French-controlled Indochina. Phung wrote about an Annamite woman (from central Vietnam) who was brought before a court in Thi Cau district of Bac Ninh province in Tonkin (northern Vietnam). As she speaks, the courtroom attendants “broke into laughter as if they were somewhere else, watching a comedy show.”<sup>37</sup> The question-answer session with the court translator goes as follows:

33. See for instance William Nelson, *Out of the Crocodile's Mouth: Russian Cartoons about the United States from "Krokodil," Moscow's Humor Magazine*, New York: Public Affairs Press, 1949.

34. Don Luce, “Popular Art and Society in Vietnam: Art and Revolution,” Michael Klein, ed., *The Vietnam Era: Media and Popular Culture in the US and Vietnam*, London: Pluto, 1990, 163–190: 163–5.

35. William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, New York: Hyperion, 2000, 79.

36. Luce, “Popular Art,” 168.

37. Vu Trong Phung, *The Industry of Marrying Europeans*, trans. Thuy Tranviet, Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006, 9.

“You don’t have a job, right?” the translator asked the woman. “Unemployed,” he continued as he turned to the judge: “*Sans profession.*” “What do you mean unemployed?” the woman questioned the translator. “What is your occupation, then,” the translator asked again. “What’s my job? My occupation is . . . marrying the Europeans!” That prompted a roar in the courtroom. The judge stood up and motioned everyone to be quiet for a long moment, but laughter still echoed from the back of the room.<sup>38</sup>

Although the practice of Vietnamese women marrying foreign soldiers was not uncommon, there was much humor in the fact that this Annamite woman took offense at being presented as “unemployed,” and indignantly told the court that her occupation was “marrying Europeans,” which she thought was a profession as good as any. The author of the narrative, Phung, depicts the humor within the embarrassing predicament of the Annamite woman who symbolized the plight of some Vietnamese women.

The Vietnamese revolutionaries tapped into a long Vietnamese tradition of using satire and humor. The American writer Dwight MacDonald, an opponent of US intervention, observed that humor is like guerrilla warfare because success depends on traveling light, striking unexpectedly, and getting away fast.<sup>39</sup> In this way, Vietnamese humor was directed both inward at Vietnamese politics and society, and outward at foreign invaders. After the end of the Vietnam War, a few Vietnamese novelists showed that the Vietnamese were, indeed, laughing while US bombs were falling over Vietnam. In *The Sorrow of War*, novelist Bao Ninh writes that members of a North Vietnamese platoon had “bastardized the regimental marching song and made it a humorous cardplayers’ song,” demonstrating the combatants’ ability to see humor in their grim situation by singing, “We’ll all be jokers in the pack, [j]ust go harder in attack[, d]ealing’s fun, so hurry back, [e]njoy the game, avoid the flak.”<sup>40</sup>

Jokes made by Vietnamese novelists about the failure of the communist state to deliver public utilities have much in common with citizens of Eastern European communist countries who used humor to criticize their rulers during the Cold

38. *Ibid.*, 25.

39. Joseph Dorinson and Joseph Boskin, “Racial and Ethnic Humor,” in Lawrence E. Mintz, ed., *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*, New York: Greenwood, 1988, 163–93: 179.

40. Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*, New York: Riverhead, 1993, 9. For other examples of humor, see *ibid.*, 11, 62, 98, 147, 167, 169, and 199.

War. Novelist Duong Thu Huong caricatures privileged North Vietnamese state officials by exposing just how far removed they were from the lives of ordinary Vietnamese. This can be seen in a conversation between two government officials (a “little fat man” and a “large myopic one”) who are traveling on a North Vietnamese train:

Suddenly, the little fat man blurted out: “Did you bring the beer?”

“Yes. You’re thirsty already?”

“Nah. We’ll drink it later.”

The large myopic one smiled: “We take the freight train to see how the masses live, and you bring along canned food?”

The little fat one laughed accommodatingly: “I’ve got a weak stomach. Our people’s food is one of the most unhygienic on the planet. In the West, running water is cleaner than our country’s bottled water.”<sup>41</sup>

Duong Thu Huong’s novel *Paradise of the Blind* satirically compares communist Vietnam with precolonial Vietnamese power structures, praising the good work of a government minister named Chinh who lived during the reign of Emperor Tu Duc (1829–1883). In the novel, a character living in postcolonial Vietnam in the 1980s says: “There you have it. What do you think? How many mandarins of our own can compare with Minister Chinh?”<sup>42</sup> After Minister Chinh retired, a mandarin named Tran Binh was promoted as governor. People compared Tran Binh, who had spent his time amassing wealth, to an incorruptible mandarin named Pham Thu. A short poem cited in *Paradise of the Blind* shows that the people had a capacity for humor especially when faced with social injustice:

With Pham Thu at the helm,  
a man’s loincloth was safe.  
But with Tran Binh at the helm,  
even a man’s balls will lose their hairs.<sup>43</sup>

41. Duong Thu Huong, *Novel Without a Name*, New York: Penguin, 1995, 162. For other examples of humor, see *ibid.*, 32, 74, 160, 165, 173, 175, 196, 199, 215, 217, 241, 243, and 274.

42. Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*, New York: William Morrow, 1993, 156. For other examples of humor, see *ibid.*, 17, 66, 153, and 194.

43. *Ibid.*, 160.

North Vietnamese diplomats tapped into this rich local tradition of humor as they entered into negotiations with US officials in Paris.

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Talks between Kissinger and senior North-Vietnamese officials in Paris were often conducted in an atmosphere of warmth and good humor. The official record of the meetings mentions several occasions when the negotiators laughed at each other's comments. Laughter is the only emotion that the note-takers have written into the official record of the meetings. The North Vietnamese sparred wittily with US negotiators in order to demonstrate that they matched them in repartee. They laughed right in the middle of debating key clauses of the peace agreement. Although the humor helped the North Vietnamese establish cordial relations with US negotiators, they were never lulled into a sense of complacency, and they never let their guard down. The North-Vietnamese diplomats used humor as a tool to argue, resist, and oppose specific points in the draft agreement. Each side made fun of the policies and tactics of the other.

However, Kissinger has generally avoided references to humor in his memoirs, and has not provided a full account of the atmosphere that prevailed at the peace talks. In a rare reference to humor, Kissinger wrote in his memoirs that when he met DRV negotiator Xuan Thuy in Paris in September 1970, Kissinger "jokingly invited him to Harvard to teach a seminar on Marxism and Leninism after the war," but Thuy declined saying that Marxism-Leninism was not for export, a comment Kissinger said was most surprising.<sup>44</sup> Thuy's comment was funny because it was so completely untrue: The export of Marxism-Leninism was a key goal of communist countries. At their meeting in August 1971, Thuy "could not resist a wisecrack that although we [the United States] had sent men to the moon," Kissinger "had been half an hour late to the meeting."<sup>45</sup> In this joke, Thuy made Kissinger's lateness an issue because it suggested a lack of both concern and respect for the North Vietnamese. By blaming Kissinger for his tardiness, Thuy argued that Kissinger's approach to negotiations lacked commitment, an accusation DRV negotiators would make in future jocular exchanges.

Kissinger thought Hanoi's leaders were "dour" and "fanatical," a description that perpetuated an erroneous and stereotypical image of the North Vietnamese

44. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 977.

45. *Ibid.*, 1035.

held by many US officials.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Kissinger believed that the DRV peace negotiator Le Duc Tho thought it expedient to maintain “the façade of cordiality” at their meetings.<sup>47</sup> In this way, Kissinger obscured the frequent genuinely humorous exchanges he had with DRV negotiators. Kissinger, nonetheless, used humor on many occasions in ways that helped win the trust of the DRV. Negotiators on both sides used humor in order to achieve several goals. They tried to put each other at ease, show commitment to reach a common objective, confess to the failure of past policies, and establish goodwill.

The first face-to-face meeting between Tho and Kissinger occurred on 21 February 1970 in a “dingy living room,” at the residence of the North Vietnamese delegates at 11 Rue Darthe in Paris.<sup>48</sup> Both sides strongly voiced their perceptions of the war, and they explored the reasons why earlier talks between the DRV and US negotiators Averell Harriman, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Philip Habib had failed. Expressing regret that those early talks had made no progress, Thuy warned that if they remained deadlocked he would not stay indefinitely in Paris: “If I leave for Hanoi, I cannot meet you every weekend,” to which Kissinger responded that “[t]he Minister is blackmailing me on the basis of my personal affection for him,” making Thuy smile and respond that “[i]t is you who blackmailed me first.”<sup>49</sup> Thuy thus placed an ultimatum before Kissinger by telling him that he would return to Hanoi, and thereby forcing the Nixon administration to contribute meaningfully to the talks. But Kissinger turned a serious issue into a lighthearted one because he knew that progress could not be made if only one side made concessions.

Not much progress was made in the early days of the negotiations in February 1970, and no end came in sight to the war because neither Washington nor Hanoi was willing to compromise. The DRV thought it could win the war, and Nixon officials believed they would not lose. The new policy of Vietnamization, which Nixon announced in the spring of 1969, loomed large over the February 1970 talks. The Hanoi leadership worried that Vietnamization had been extended to forces allied with the United States in Cambodia and Laos, and that those allies were now the beneficiaries of US weapons and training. Under this policy, ARVN

46. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999, 469.

47. Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1982, 24.

48. Berman, *No Peace*, 63.

49. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 21 February 21, 1970, North Vietnamese Residence in Paris, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 121, NARA.



would assume the greater burden of fighting the NLF and PAVN. Hanoi's concerns stemmed from the fact that local communist guerrilla forces in Cambodia and Laos could no longer face the better equipped regular forces in those countries, making it necessary for PAVN to get directly involved in the war there. Hanoi worried that the diversion of PAVN forces, which had been originally reserved for war in South Vietnam, to Cambodia and Laos would relieve the pressure on the Saigon regime.<sup>50</sup> In 1970, Hanoi called an emergency meeting of guerrilla forces from Cambodia and Laos to coordinate plans to combat the expanded range of US operations.

It was against the background of Vietnamization that the two sides discussed the role of the Pathet Lao resistance forces in Laos at the 21 February 1970 meeting. "Mr. Le Duc Tho," Kissinger commented, "has said that we are trying to defeat the Pathet Lao and are increasing the intensity of the war [but, t]o us, it appears that exactly the opposite is happening," adding that "[m]ost of the Pathet Lao we observe speak Vietnamese."<sup>51</sup> The official record of the meeting carries the notation that the North Vietnamese "smiled" at these remarks.<sup>52</sup> In this humorous exchange, Kissinger was letting Thuy know that he knew about the arrival of PAVN units in Laos in order to reinforce the Pathet Lao. It was obvious to Kissinger that some Pathet Lao guerrillas were not Laotians at all, and that they were North Vietnamese in Lao uniforms. At this stage of the war, Nixon's Vietnamization doctrine had pushed North Vietnam against the wall, forcing Hanoi to spread its forces thinly across Cambodia and Laos, in effect hurting Hanoi's revolution in South Vietnam. In view of the perilous situation facing the DRV, all that Thuy could muster in response was a weak smile. The Nixon Doctrine, of which Vietnamization was a part, had not only placed Hanoi at a disadvantage and impaired its ability to make war in the south, but also made it plain to the DRV that the United States was using military pressure to negotiate from a position of strength.<sup>53</sup> The DRV also blamed the United States for choreographing the coup against Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia in March 1970.

50. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 22.

51. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 21 February 1970, North Vietnamese Residence in Paris, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 121, NARA.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Berman, *No Peace*, 73.

When they discussed a schedule for future meetings, their banter quickly turned into a sexist exchange with both sides finding much to laugh about. Thuy suggested that if Kissinger fixed a date, the DRV side would arrange a program of discussion. Then Kissinger quipped: "My absence from Washington is very noticeable. We would prefer Sunday to Saturday," to which he added, "If I leave on Sunday, everyone will think I have a girl."<sup>54</sup> Thuy helpfully offered: "Leave the girl somewhere, and come here for the discussions . . . [t]his is a suggestion of goodwill," to which Kissinger responded, "As always the Minister has left out the essential element. First I need a girlfriend," leading Thuy to suggest, "Look for one. I am told you have many."<sup>55</sup> It is surprising that Thuy made humorous comments at all because the battlefield reality was extremely unfavorable to the communist revolution in the south. In addition to the pressures of Vietnamization, the US-ARVN pacification program had prevented expansion of NLF "liberated" areas. In response to these new challenges, the DRV realized that it was relying much too heavily on military action. At the Eighteenth Plenary of the Lao Dong party in January 1970, party leaders argued that they needed to elevate diplomatic activity to the level of military activity.<sup>56</sup> This plenary session marked the end of DRV policy of simultaneously pursuing military victory while negotiating without any intention of compromising. At the February talks in Paris, Kissinger stressed the need to find a peaceful solution quickly, while Thuy repeated the DRV standpoint that the United States must withdraw its forces from the south within six months, and agree to a coalition government in the south that included members of the NLF but excluded the leaders of South Vietnam. Talks at this stage failed to make progress because US and DRV negotiators did not compromise. The main obstacle to a ceasefire remained the terms and conditions under which the United States would withdraw its troops.

Ahead of his meeting with the DRV side in March, Kissinger decided that he would not appear too eager to reach agreement as US negotiators had done in the past with the result that the DRV had never been "forced" to make concessions.<sup>57</sup> Kissinger aimed to pin them down on the principle of reciprocity in the withdrawal of non-South Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam. But when he raised

54. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 21 February 1970, North Vietnamese Residence in Paris, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 121, NARA.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 2–25.

57. Berman, *No Peace*, 69–70.

the reciprocity principle with the DRV side, they “contemptuously rejected it with a pedantic lecture.”<sup>58</sup> Kissinger showed his irritation because the DRV had never acknowledged the presence of its military forces in the south.

The hardline attitude exhibited by both sides did not prevent them from making jokes, though. The record of the meeting on 16 March 1970 makes specific mention of the lighthearted atmosphere at the talks: “They [the DRV negotiators] seemed to enjoy the less serious exchanges as much as ever.”<sup>59</sup> DRV negotiators had realized that they had to answer Kissinger’s humorous fusillade with their own arsenal of jokes. Because the reality on the ground did not favor the DRV, it was important for them to appear self-confident. An example of Cold-War humorous banter occurred at a meeting in April 1970 at the residence of the DRV negotiators in Paris, when Tho initiated a jocular exchange by making fun of Kissinger’s Western ideology. Tho commented that Kissinger’s philosophy was “difficult to understand,” and was “a little tortuous,” to which Kissinger responded, “When the war is over, I will invite Special Advisor Le Duc Tho to the United States to lecture on Marxist philosophy.”<sup>60</sup> After Tho said he would be happy to come, Kissinger proffered that he never spoke for more than half an hour, unlike Soviet leaders who spoke for hours. Tho quipped: “But since you came here for these meetings, sometimes you speak for over thirty minutes, but say nothing concrete [, while I]ast time you said Harvard professors never speak for more than forty-five minutes.”<sup>61</sup> To which Kissinger responded, “Never less.” It was now Kissinger’s chance to turn the tables: “It is very difficult to please my colleagues from Hanoi. When I say something general, they accuse me of not being a Leninist. When I say something specific, they don’t like it.”<sup>62</sup> Kissinger then added,

If I may tell the Special Advisor one joke, I will then continue my remarks.  
Someone asked [French poet and novelist] Anatole France if he had read

58. Ibid.

59. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 16 March 1970, North Vietnamese Residence in Paris, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 121, NARA.

60. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 4 April 1970, North Vietnamese Residence in Paris, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 121, NARA.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

[Immanuel] Kant [the German philosopher]. France said no; he had read nine volumes, but the verb was in the tenth.<sup>63</sup>

In this exchange, Tho made the point that Kissinger's ideology was both difficult to comprehend and tortuous, and that he tended to lecture them for more than thirty minutes at a time without making any specific contribution. In this way, Tho cleverly used humor to confront Kissinger about his professorial style of negotiating which prevented the talks from making progress. Even Nixon would soon begin doubting the effectiveness of Kissinger's method of negotiating.

The North Vietnamese really had very little to laugh about at this time, for 31,000 US and 43,000 ARVN forces launched a military incursion into Cambodia from late April to July 1970 in order to destroy specifically NLF operational headquarters, and improve the US bargaining position in general at the peace talks.<sup>64</sup> They failed to even find the elusive headquarters, but they killed 11,349 guerrilla fighters. The incursion into Cambodia hurt Nixon at home, however, owing to a public outcry against his public professions about seeking a peaceful solution while expanding the war to neutral Cambodia.

The United States did not wish to relinquish the diplomatic advantage that US forces in South Vietnam provided, nor did it want to hurt the prospect of securing the release of US prisoners of war (POWs) held by the DRV. Hanoi's principal negotiating goal was to obtain the withdrawal of US forces from the south.<sup>65</sup> But as the military and diplomatic stalemate persisted, the two sides became more accommodating of the other's standpoint. At a negotiating session in September 1970 the DRV linked the release of US POWs to a US schedule of troop withdrawal. The DRV aimed to exploit the POW issue, but in order to persuade the US to accept those terms the DRV dropped its demand for financial reparations, which it had long hoped the United States would provide in order to rebuild war-ravaged Vietnam.<sup>66</sup>

Tho and Thuy worried that Nixon would unrelentingly use aerial bombardment and ground forces to pin down PAVN. In February 1971, ARVN ground troops backed by US aircraft invaded Laos where they were confronted by PAVN. Washington claimed they had killed 15,000 PAVN troops, and destroyed Hanoi's capability to launch major attacks into South Vietnam from within Laos, but

63. Ibid.

64. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 23.

65. Ibid, 26-7.

66. Ibid, 27.

2,000 ARVN soldiers had also died fighting.<sup>67</sup> Following the invasion of Laos, in May 1971 Kissinger softened the US position on a key issue: The United States would set a date for completing US troop withdrawal under a broader agreement incorporating POW exchanges and ceasefire. The implication of the US concession was most revealing, for it meant that Washington would not object to PAVN troops remaining in the south after a ceasefire. South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu was not informed about any of this. The US decision to allow the DRV to keep its troops in the south resulted from the failure of the US-ARVN incursion into Laos. Nixon feared that recent DRV military success could embolden Hanoi to wage war more aggressively in the south, and stall the peace talks, with the DRV escalating military attacks in order to demonstrate both the shortcomings of Nixon's Vietnamization policy and ARVN weakness. Hanoi indeed instructed Tho and Thuy not to make any new concessions, and the NLF launched artillery bombardment of Saigon. By September 1971, Nixon began doubting Kissinger's skills as a diplomat with the North Vietnamese, and spoke about Kissinger's "delusions of grandeur as a peacemaker."<sup>68</sup> During this month, Nixon had targets in the lower part of North Vietnam bombed, and, in the following December, he ordered US aircraft to bomb DRV military and industrial facilities. Initially, Nixon's "coercive diplomacy" had improved US bargaining power at the talks. But now, angered by the US bombardment, Hanoi suspended the talks in Paris. On 30 March 1972, in order to regain diplomatic leverage, the DRV launched the biggest single conventional warfare attack in the entire war in order to cripple the ARVN. Known as the Nguyen Hue Offensive (or the Easter Offensive), the attack lasted six months; by June 1972, however, the Lao Dong party realized that its military aggressiveness was answered by increasingly heavy US bombardment of the north, and that it must now place greater emphasis on diplomacy and bargaining.

Kissinger had lost his humor. DRV diplomat Luu Van Loi recalls that at the 2 May 1972 meeting, Kissinger "no longer had the appearance of a university professor making long speeches and continually joking, but a man speaking sparingly, seemingly embarrassed and thoughtful."<sup>69</sup> Kissinger described his meeting with Tho as "brutal" because the DRV side had realized that the Thieu

67. Ibid, 27.

68. Berman, *No Peace*, 85.

69. Ibid, 126-7.

regime was extremely vulnerable after the DRV battlefield victory in Quang Tri.<sup>70</sup> North-Vietnamese military successes were short-lived because Nixon launched Operation Linebacker, a devastating and lengthy bombing of the north from May to December 1972, which destroyed or slowed passage of men and materiel along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Easter Offensive was clearly a military defeat for the DRV, which lost half the 200,000 troops it had deployed. Huge battlefield losses forced Hanoi to return to the peace talks. In the shifting perceptions of which side had the upperhand in the negotiations, this time the DRV negotiators were the underdogs.

When talks resumed in July 1972, Kissinger made a remarkable new proposal aimed at keeping the DRV engaged and demonstrating that the US side now would set the pace and agenda at the talks. Kissinger proposed unilateral withdrawal of US troops without demanding simultaneous withdrawal of North-Vietnamese forces from the south. Hanoi welcomed the news, but, even as the two sides negotiated in Paris, Nixon continued the bombardment of the north, because he wished to pressure Hanoi in order to obtain concessions in Paris and promote the myth that he was not abandoning the Saigon regime. The continuing bombardment surprised Hanoi, but Nixon believed that it would ensure that Hanoi remained committed to peace negotiations and would bring its leaders to the breaking point.<sup>71</sup> Although US agreement to withdraw troops signaled progress, the two sides remained far apart on the nature of a final peace agreement. The DRV wanted an overall political settlement that enshrined the reunification of Vietnam, but the United States only wanted a military settlement, without addressing the political future of the south. Kissinger knew that Hanoi would never sign until the political issues were agreed upon, but he was willing to address these concerns. His chief problem was selling the settlement to Thieu. For his part, Thieu was convinced that Kissinger was dealing with Hanoi behind his back and that he was being betrayed.<sup>72</sup> At this time, Hanoi's leaders worried that, if they did not accept the existing peace terms, their bargaining power could weaken. They feared that, if Nixon was reelected without an agreement, he would become more hardline than he had been before. Not wishing to allow Nixon's election prospects to dictate their policy, Hanoi's leaders decided to settle unresolved issues with Kissinger before the US presidential election in 1972. Besides

70. Ibid.

71. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 59.

72. Ibid, 64.

this, the DRV had suffered huge casualties in the Easter Offensive, and by September Hanoi considered an agreement essential.

The military and diplomatic advantage was shifting decisively against the DRV for five reasons: The DRV lost thousands of troops as well as 70% of its tanks in the Easter Offensive; it was confronted with an increasingly successful US-ARVN pacification of the south, when 33,000 NLF insurgents were arrested in the south; the size of ARVN had increased under Vietnamization to more than 1 million troops, which was more than double the number in 1966; the success of Nixon's détente with Moscow and Beijing (after Nixon's famous trip to China in February 1972 to normalize relations) made Hanoi fear that it could not count on prolonged support from those communist allies; and US bombing had destroyed or damaged all DRV industrial factories, which could not be repaired or rebuilt. Therefore, the DRV negotiated from a position of weakness, even if it masked this weakness as well as it could.

By September 1972, the chief obstacle to an agreement was the DRV fear that Washington would interfere in the south even after a peace settlement. The DRV now demanded the recognition of the NLF and the NLF-led underground Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). Kissinger approved of the change in Hanoi's stance, because the DRV had dropped its demand for the removal of Thieu from office and had extended the US troop withdrawal period from thirty-five to forty days. Nixon believed he had the upper hand in the negotiations, but not for long. Under the phased withdrawal of US troops begun in 1969 only some 40,000 of them still remained in Vietnam. Nixon feared losing leverage over Hanoi if no agreement was reached and US troop numbers kept falling. Nixon also worried that he needed to sign an agreement soon because the patience of US congressmen and the American public had run out and they wanted to bring US troops back home and end the war.

The Hanoi side also felt the urgency. The Lao Dong party politburo told Tho and Thuy that they should attempt to end the war before the US election, and defeat Nixon's plan to prolong the talks, as well as Nixon's plan to continue Vietnamizing the war and negotiate from a position of strength.<sup>73</sup> Eager to persuade Kissinger to sign on to an agreement that provided for ceasefire and US troop withdrawal, Hanoi told Washington about its wish to reach a final peace settlement. Nixon received the message with enthusiasm.<sup>74</sup> So, on 7 October 1972, Tho presented the first-ever complete draft agreement on ending the war,

73. *Ibid.*, 79.

74. *Ibid.*, 79.

containing important new concessions: Hanoi no longer wanted Thieu's removal, or the creation of a coalition government with the PRG. The next day Kissinger argued that no progress could be made without military issues being addressed. Tho countered that both political and military issues should be tabled.

As they settled down for talks on 8 October 1972, Kissinger aimed a quip at Tho and Thuy: "Did I force you to go to early mass this morning?"<sup>75</sup> The delegates laughed at Kissinger's conflation of religion and communism. Kissinger added: "I am responsible then for any inadequacies in the salvation of your soul."<sup>76</sup> Moments later Tho responded: "But Christ would like peace too and not war."<sup>77</sup> Here, both sides found that it was possible to indulge in humorous banter because they had sensed an agreement was within grasp. Tho's reference to the peaceful nature of Christ was aimed at showing respect for the religion of the US negotiators, and urging them to behave like good, peaceful Christians. Tho cleverly employed religion to resist the US intervention, and reminded Kissinger about Christian values.

Kissinger inquired if Thuy would have liked to see the horse race in Paris that day. Kissinger remarked that when the riders "get around the other side they're behind the trees so you can't see them, and I'm told that that's where the jockeys decide who will win," after which the conversation proceeded as follows:

[Tho asked:] But we, are we making now a race to peace or to war?

[Kissinger replied:] To peace, and we are behind the trees!

[Tho:] But shall we overcome those trees or shall we be hindered by these trees?

[Kissinger:] No, we will settle.<sup>78</sup>

By using images of horse racing, Kissinger compared the peace talks to a two-horse race that was now in its final climactic moments, a race which both sides would lose if they failed to reach agreement. Inherent in these images was Kissinger's warning that the North Vietnamese were risking the future of their country if they failed to compromise. In this jocular episode, Tho raised the provocative historical question—by turning Kissinger's comment around—

75. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 8 October 1972, Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, NARA.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*



whether the two sides were racing toward war or toward peace. Within the horse racing analogy runs the narrative of gambling, betting, and risk-taking. It was a worrisome analogy for both sides, for the imagery also carries three conflicting narratives, of both sides emerging as winners, of only one winner in the end, and that winning meant peace and losing meant prolonged war, as Tho pointed out. This particular exchange drew nervous laughs from the participants.

Soon after this exchange, Kissinger remarked on Thuy's recovery from illness:

I am glad to see, incidentally, that the Minister is fully recovered, and in his old fighting form. That's why I brought General [Alexander] Haig along, so that I have some support. [Laughing, Thuy responded:] So now your side is bigger today with General Haig assisting.<sup>79</sup>

The DRV negotiators were witness to the best of the Kissinger repertoire of humor. Just a few minutes after commenting on Thuy's return to "fighting form," Kissinger responded to Tho's concern about exercising his right to make proposals based on the DRV's principles. Kissinger quipped:

I don't have the impression that the Special Advisor is extremely reticent about exercising that right. In fact, it's a lucky thing that my megalomania is so well developed or I would really suffer from feelings of inadequacy after I hear the Special Advisor.<sup>80</sup>

Kissinger could now afford to crack jokes freely out of a huge sense of relief, for he knew that the United States would soon be unburdened of its task of fighting the war.

During the same session, a humorous exchange occurred when the two sides discussed a clause relating to the withdrawal of US military forces within sixty days of signing a peace agreement. Thuy was perplexed at the US intention to retain its naval forces in the territorial waters of Vietnam even after a pact was inked. Kissinger said, "Well, they [US ships] won't be in the territorial waters; that's only 12 miles at most."<sup>81</sup> There was much laughter all around the table, but the Vietnamese were nervous. Thuy asked for clarification, "But our territorial waters are much larger than 12; because 12 is within the range of your cannons, your guns."<sup>82</sup> Here is what Kissinger offered by way of clarification: "Well, maybe

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

81. Ibid.

82. Ibid.

your strategic waters. We only claim three miles; you claim 12 miles. We could compromise on 8 miles.”<sup>83</sup> There was more laughter at the suggestion that the DRV would have to compromise on an internationally accepted covenant of the Law of the Sea governing international waters. In this humorous exchange, Thuy resisted Kissinger’s proposal to station US warships inside Vietnam’s territorial waters. Yet, Kissinger was still exercising US hegemonic power to force Hanoi to accept a much truncated maritime boundary. Hanoi wished to keep US warships outside the 12 nautical mile territorial limit plus another 12 nautical mile contiguous zone. But Kissinger was aiming to reduce Vietnam’s territorial waters to three nautical miles, which is nine nautical miles less than the internationally-accepted limit of 12 nautical miles.

The meeting broke for lunch and reassembled around a snack table. When Tho suggested that the two sides should immediately discuss a ceasefire, as the United States had done after the Six Day War between Egypt (with the support of Jordan and Syria) and Israel in 1967, Kissinger’s reply caused much laughter: “We have, unfortunately, not fought the Egyptians. They would settle much more quickly than you. Their endurance is six days, not twenty-five years.”<sup>84</sup> Kissinger, thus, paid tribute to the steely determination of the North Vietnamese to continue a resistance war for 25 years.

At the same session, discussions focused on the contentious issue of the continuing presence of PAVN troops in South Vietnam. Cognizant of the DRV’s determination to maintain PAVN troop presence in the south even after an accord was signed, US negotiators conceded that they had “not asked for the withdrawal of all your forces.”<sup>85</sup> Instead, on the day of the ceasefire, there had to be an exchange of units of all combatant forces in each area. This would show that some PAVN units which had entered the south after 25 March 1972 had returned to the north. Kissinger deliberately left the agreement vague and gave the DRV the assurance that “we don’t want to write it [these details on troop presence and movement] into the agreement.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, Kissinger paved the way for the DRV to retain its fighting forces in the south. Kissinger even found room to inject his now famous wit into this grave issue: “If we can’t find every [DRV] tank we are not likely to find every soldier.”<sup>87</sup> Everybody laughed, and Tho made the rejoinder:

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Ibid.*

“You can’t find them because all of them are Vietnamese.”<sup>88</sup> There was more laughter. Tho’s comment went to the heart of the Vietnamese Revolution in the south: PAVN-NLF soldiers possessed the ability to merge seamlessly with common villagers, making it difficult for US-ARVN forces to detect them. Tho’s rejoinder also carried the guerrilla narrative, suggesting that the enemy would not find PAVN-NLF partisans because they employed superior guerrilla tactics.

When the negotiators met the following day, it was the turn of DRV officials to crack a joke or two. Kissinger inquired about the arrangements for his forthcoming trip to Hanoi. The Lao Dong politburo had requested that Kissinger visit Hanoi to demonstrate the new relationship between the two countries. Kissinger informed the DRV negotiators that he would fly into Hanoi on the presidential Boeing, which would remain parked at the airport in Hanoi. He would use the Boeing to receive radio messages from Washington. Kissinger asked if there would be a car and driver waiting at the airport in Hanoi, who would carry messages to the hotel where Kissinger would stay. Tho responded, “They [the driver and the car] will have to cross a pontoon bridge, so it will take a longer time.”<sup>89</sup> There was much laughter. Kissinger added, “Also our aircraft crew has to stay with aircraft. We don’t want you to learn our codes.”<sup>90</sup> There was more laughter. Tho’s remark that Kissinger’s driver would have to run the gauntlet of crossing a pontoon bridge was an admission of underdeveloped DRV infrastructure.

Kissinger then asked if there was an airfield large enough to accommodate the presidential Boeing, which would fly Kissinger to Hanoi using the sea route over the Gulf of Tonkin. Kissinger asked in all seriousness if the DRV would provide a ramp of the appropriate size for a Boeing at the airport. Tho replied: “Probably your planes are too high, and we have no stairs, so you will have to parachute.”<sup>91</sup> After the laughter subsided, Tho advised Kissinger to bring his own stairs because the stairs in Hanoi only fitted Soviet-made Ilyushin-18 aircraft. Turning to his Military Assistant Major General Alexander Haig, Kissinger asked: “We can’t bring stairs, can we?”<sup>92</sup>

88. Ibid.

89. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 9 October 1972, Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, NARA.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid.

Tho's remark about Kissinger having to parachute down from his aircraft served as a symbolic victory over Kissinger. By making the US officials the butt of a joke the embattled North-Vietnamese negotiators achieved, in a roundabout way, the enjoyment of overcoming the enemy. Tho also attempted to cover up the deficiencies of DRV airport infrastructure by using humor. Tho suggested that the trip not be announced to the Washington media until Kissinger landed in Hanoi because prior announcement may lead to "some movement in the public opinion."<sup>93</sup> Kissinger replied jocularly, "I am very popular in Hanoi, I understand."<sup>94</sup> Tho assured Kissinger that the DRV would make arrangements for Kissinger to meet whomever he liked in Hanoi, including the prime minister and senior ministers. Kissinger responded, "I would like to find out from General [Vo Nguyen] Giap how he got his tanks to An Loc, so that I know where to put the [US] inspection teams on the Trail."<sup>95</sup> The comment about the Battle of An Loc, fought in April and May 1972 in a small town in South Vietnam, generated much laughter. In this encounter, Kissinger was candid about US failure to properly detect North Vietnamese movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and was actually asking the enemy to reveal their military secrets.

Just before the meeting ended, Kissinger remarked, "And when the Special Advisor goes to bed tonight and he is thinking about the Ho Chi Minh Trail, maybe some ideas will come to him [about how to move the peace process along]."<sup>96</sup> Tho responded: "After the restoration of peace I will show you the Ho Chi Minh Trail. But I don't know if you are strong enough to climb mountains."<sup>97</sup> In order to gain the upper hand in the repartee, Tho resisted Kissinger by questioning his fitness to negotiate the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The two sides spent the next day, 10 October 1972, comparing each other's draft agreements, and reconciling where they differed. Both sides felt they were close to a breakthrough. DRV negotiators discussed Kissinger's proposed official program in Hanoi. Tho said that he would be present at the airport to receive Kissinger, to which Thuy added, "And I will be here [in Paris] to see you off."<sup>98</sup> The

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 10 October 1972, Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, NARA.

remark generated laughter because it showed that the DRV officials were closely monitoring Kissinger's movements. During the same session, Kissinger remarked that it would be impossible for him to put before Nixon some of the proposals forwarded by the DRV. Nixon would never sign a document which had Cuba as one of the guarantors of a peace agreement. Kissinger said: "I can't even go back with such a document for his approval . . . unless you want me to be unemployed the day I bring it back."<sup>99</sup> All the participants laughed. When the laughter subsided, Thuy wisecracked: "You are a professor!"<sup>100</sup> He was making the point that being a professor, Kissinger should have no difficulty returning to his teaching job if Nixon fired him. Thuy's joke suggested that Kissinger was dispensable, and that the peace talks could continue without him. In contrast, the DRV was engaged in a long resistance war that would outlast US presidents and officials.

After a break when the session resumed Kissinger argued that the United States had not found the International Control Commission (ICC) very helpful. Although the commission was supposed to monitor the peace between North and South Vietnam after the Geneva Agreements in 1954, it had failed to find evidence of a guerrilla war going on in the south. Kissinger commented that the DRV had not found the commission "too restrictive," after which Tho remarked:

But primarily they can't restrict you.

[Kissinger:] Well, we are not going up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail—to my great sorrow.

[Tho:] But you are always recalling the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Probably you like it.

[Laughter]

[Kissinger:] I'd like to return it to the elephants who live there.<sup>101</sup>

Tho turned Kissinger's serious remark about the failure of the ICC to detect guerrilla activity into a joke by pointing out that the ICC had done nothing to prevent the United States from intervening in Vietnam. In this way, Tho resisted the US intervention.

The same day, when Tho offered to underline in ink an important clause so that Kissinger would not forget it, Kissinger replied, "If you would like to have Mr. Lord on your staff, he's very good at underlining papers . . . does it for me all the

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

time. . . . I can recommend him highly.”<sup>102</sup> Winston Lord was a member of the National Security Council planning staff and an aide to Kissinger and was present at the meeting. Kissinger demonstrated his sharp wit by turning Tho’s serious suggestion about highlighting a key point into a joke that implied that it was the North Vietnamese who actually needed to underline key points so that they would not forget them, intentionally or otherwise.

At the same session much laughter ensued when Kissinger raised a “practical question” involving the presence of North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam: “how is it possible not to fly airplanes over somebody’s territory in South Vietnam [, for y]ou usually have your people at the end of each runway.”<sup>103</sup> By making light of a very important sticking point—the presence of DRV troops in South Vietnam—Kissinger was admitting that the United States could not prevent the DRV from keeping its forces in the south. The joke underscored US failure to compel the DRV to withdraw its troops from South Vietnam, and Washington’s eventual acceptance of the presence of those troops in the south.

Toward the end of the meeting Tho and Kissinger spoke briefly about the very real danger of failing to achieve a peace agreement. Kissinger remarked:

The tragedy if we fail is that then there are about a thousand adjectives the Minister has not used yet. They will be lost to literary history.<sup>104</sup>

Kissinger was referring to Tho’s florid diatribes against US imperialism, neocolonialism, and intervention in Vietnam. The session ended amid much laughter. The record shows that the North Vietnamese officials were often laughing at Kissinger’s jokes.

At another meeting with Tho, Kissinger remarked that all the details of his proposed trip to Hanoi could be finalized on the spot, “unless the President fires me when he sees this agreement,” to which he added:

Mr Special Adviser, you are even stronger than your Soviet associates. They kept me up more than twelve hours; you are keeping me up longer than that. When we made the agreement on strategic arms, I was with Mr. [Andrei] Gromyko [the Soviet foreign minister] until four in the morning.<sup>105</sup>

102. *Ibid.*

103. *Ibid.*

104. *Ibid.*

105. Memcon, Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger, 11 October 1972, Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, NARA.

Kissinger's comment that Nixon would fire him was meant to convey to the North Vietnamese negotiators that the United States had gone out of its way to craft a compromise agreement. And, Kissinger's remark that negotiations with Tho had lasted more than twelve hours was intended to show that the US-DRV peace agreement was equally important and as difficult to achieve as the US-Soviet agreement on strategic weapons.

On 11 October 1972, during discussions on possible US post-war reconstruction aid for the DRV, Kissinger made a sarcastic comment about the peace groups that had visited Hanoi, but the remark was received in good humor. Kissinger said that in order to help in the reconstruction of the DRV, the United States intended to mobilize many private groups that are "somewhat more influential than the ones you have up to now invited to Hanoi."<sup>106</sup> Kissinger was referring to the economic and humanitarian aid provided by people and anti-war groups in Europe and the communist bloc, many of whom had visited North Vietnam. Kissinger's comment drew laughter from the participants. At this stage in the war, neither side took reconstruction aid seriously.

A tentative peace agreement was reached at the session on 11 October: The Thieu government would remain in power, but the text said nothing about North Vietnamese troops in the south. The two sides agreed to release POWs together with the troop withdrawal. Thus, the United States acknowledged that its long war in Vietnam had ended. Kissinger was to show the draft agreement to Nixon, and assured Tho that he would send word of Nixon's reaction very soon. They were to meet again on 17 October 1972 to finalize the agreement. Kissinger has described the October session as "my most thrilling moment in public service" because he had brought the two sides so close to "an exhilarating goal."<sup>107</sup> The DRV was happy with the agreement because it brought them nearer to their ultimate goal of reunification, and Nixon had abandoned his commitment to Thieu. In recognition of approaching peace, on 14 October Nixon curtailed bombing sorties against North Vietnam to 200 a day, and restricted devastating B-52 bombing raids, but he refused to stop the bombardment altogether because he argued that he would not be taken in by the mere prospect of an agreement as Johnson had been in 1968.<sup>108</sup> On 16 October, Nixon told Kissinger to work

106. Ibid.

107. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 86.

108. Ibid., 87.

towards an honorable peace without being influenced by the US presidential election. The next day, the two sides continued discussions on the release of prisoners of war.

When the session resumed after lunch on 17 October 1972, Kissinger asked if the delegation members accompanying Thuy were “from your regular party, or have you brought in reinforcements from Hanoi?”<sup>109</sup> Amid much laughter, Thuy remarked that Kissinger should have no objections because they were not military reinforcements. Toward the end of the session, Kissinger said he wanted to make “an anti-colonial proposal” to delete the French version of the draft agreement; after the laughter abated, Kissinger added, “I don’t see why we need a French version” as it would delay matters even more.<sup>110</sup> The anti-colonial comment by Kissinger appealed to the North Vietnamese.

As Kissinger and Tho narrowed their differences, Kissinger made a huge effort to reassure Thieu that he had no cause to fear North Vietnamese forces in the south, and that the peace agreement’s ban on infiltration would make it impossible for the north to overthrow the Saigon regime by force.<sup>111</sup> On 20 October 1972, Kissinger met several Saigon regime officials who had been given a copy of the final agreement. These officials now wanted several clauses changed: In particular, they wanted the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel emphasized as a political border and not a demilitarized zone, so that the sovereignty of the south was safeguarded. Kissinger assured them that the changes would be made, but consultations with Saigon regime officials would now take longer. On the same day, Pham Van Dong sent a message to Nixon, blaming him for delaying the signing of the agreement, in disregard for the previously agreed timeframe. Dong told Nixon that the DRV had accepted all of Nixon’s demands. Even US official Alexander Haig agreed that the DRV had conceded to all US demands, and the opportunity to sign a final agreement was now at hand. Within days Kissinger was faced with disappointment, when Thieu rejected the entire peace plan, and refused to use the agreement as a basis for discussion. Thieu’s rejection was based on his sense of betrayal by his US allies: He had never been included in the peace talks, and Kissinger had attempted to thrust a peace agreement on him, which allowed 145,000 to 250,000 North Vietnamese troops to remain in the south. Kissinger, who had put so much

109. Memcon, Xuan Thuy, Henry Kissinger, William Sullivan, 17 October 1972, Villa, Avenue du General Leclerc, Gif sur Yvette, 91 Essonne, France, NPMP, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files—Far East—Vietnam, Box 122, NARA.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 79–126.



effort—not to mention humor—into the peace talks was annoyed with Thieu for rejecting the deal. From here on, relations between Nixon and DRV leaders worsened. Nixon was displeased that Hanoi had leaked the terms of the peace agreement to the press. Hanoi publicly blamed Washington for causing tremendous destruction in Vietnam, arguing that it was the obligation of the United States to contribute funds to rebuild the country.

Hopes of signing a peace accord faded when both the DRV and the Saigon regime began expanding the areas under their control in South Vietnam, in a bid to grab as much land as they could, in order to demonstrate to international supervisors that they actually administered those areas.<sup>112</sup> On 23 October 1972, Nixon decided not to rush into signing an agreement before the US presidential election. Meanwhile, Thieu addressed the people of South Vietnam over radio and television, assuring them that Nixon would not abandon them, and that he would never sign a peace agreement under terms favoring North Vietnam. Soon after Thieu had finished talking, Hanoi released the text of the agreement to the press, and accused Washington of failing to adhere to an agreed schedule to sign the accord.

Although the peace talks were often conducted in good humor, negotiations ended in failure in December 1972 with both sides blaming each other for their collapse. On 19 December, Kissinger blamed the North Vietnamese for failing to adhere to the terms of the accord.<sup>113</sup> North Vietnam argued that the United States was attempting to blame the DRV before the court of world opinion. Hanoi explained that the United States intended to continue its Vietnamization policy, and use military force to compel the Vietnamese to accept the terms imposed by the United States. For its part, the United States wanted the draft agreement modified in key areas, for now it refused to recognize the existence of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and it wanted the withdrawal of communist forces from the south.<sup>114</sup>

When the talks ended in failure, Nixon resumed the bombardment of North Vietnam during Christmas 1972 in order to force Hanoi to accept US terms. Historians are divided whether the bombing tactic was a success or a failure. Some argue that the tactic failed because the peace agreement signed eventually in January 1973 was the same one that Hanoi and Washington had rejected in

112. Ibid.

113. See James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War*, Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 2004, 180; and Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 145.

114. Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 116.

December. Gareth Porter has argued that the Christmas bombings made the Paris agreement possible because they forced Nixon and Kissinger to accept the very terms they had rejected in December.<sup>115</sup> In this sense, the Christmas bombings failed to achieve their objective. Hanoi signed because it was an effortless way to get the United States out of Vietnam. Pierre Asselin argues that the Christmas bombings did not fail, however.<sup>116</sup> The DRV agreed to resume peace talks on 26 December because the bombardment had crippled its vital economic, industrial, and military organs, and jeopardized the revolution. Bombardment forced Hanoi back to the negotiation table.

After the peace agreement was signed, DRV and US negotiators followed a new code of behavior in their negotiations. When the peace talks in Paris resumed, the peace delegations of the two sides “never had any social contact except for brief bantering during breaks.”<sup>117</sup> But on 13 January 1973, with a draft agreement in place, the two sides “ate for the first time as a group.”<sup>118</sup> US and Vietnamese negotiators sat alternately around a table, and Kissinger and Tho raised toasts to lasting peace and friendship between their two peoples. However, back in Hanoi, North Vietnamese cartoonists regularly caricatured President Nixon’s domestic and foreign policy.

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The humor of the Paris peace talks is closely connected to the humor of North-Vietnamese cartoonists and artists because their works of art focused on the peace negotiations and US intervention in Vietnam. Cartoonists and artists created works on topics such as the “bombing-and-negotiating” tactics of the United States. Targets for North-Vietnamese cartoonists also included US support for the Thieu regime (portrayed as thoroughly corrupt), and the effect of Nixon’s Vietnamization policy.

Vietnamese cartoonists tapped into a long tradition of cartooning. Since the 1920s, cartoons appearing in Vietnamese periodicals carried images of French colonial officials, Vietnamese mandarins, Westernized women, and exploited

115. Porter, *Peace Denied*, 165.

116. Asselin, *Bitter Peace*, 164–5.

117. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 1466.

118. *Ibid.*

peasants.<sup>119</sup> After the Vietnamese revolutionaries launched their national-liberation struggle against the colonial powers, the cartoonists and artists began operating under guidelines laid down by the Lao Dong party. It directed the creation of such cultural products as were needed under a 1943 directive known as “Theses on Culture.”<sup>120</sup> The theses argued that the party needed the support of intellectuals, writers, and poets who were called upon to create propaganda urging the masses to demonstrate solidarity with the revolution, and to convince intellectuals about the correctness of the party’s standpoint. Thus, artists performed the required role of propagandists in the cause of national liberation against foreign rule and intervention. Occasionally, writers such as Nguyen Tuan did it with humor. Tuan recalled the Viet Minh congress of 1948:

The congress in Viet Bac was the happiest. . . . At the time I had presented a discussion paper. In the middle I stopped and asked the permission of the congress to tell a funny story. That “good-smelling fart, bad-smelling fart” story. Then I continued to read my paper.<sup>121</sup>

DRV cartoonists, illustrators, historians, and filmmakers produced hundreds of works depicting the US intervention as hegemonic, racist, and paternalistic. As works of resistance, they educated the North-Vietnamese people and explained the DRV perspective to foreign audiences, particularly Western anti-war activists and journalists that traveled to Hanoi to see with their own eyes the devastation caused by US bombardment. North-Vietnamese historians and journalists justified the DRV’s right to defend itself with military means, and argued that US policy in Vietnam was a colossal failure. The historians produced a narrative on US foreign policy in Vietnam designed to inform and educate the members of the DRV diplomatic front consisting not just of DRV diplomats, but also workers, women, students, writers, artists, and sportspersons, all of whom established links with their counterparts abroad in order to portray the DRV perspective.

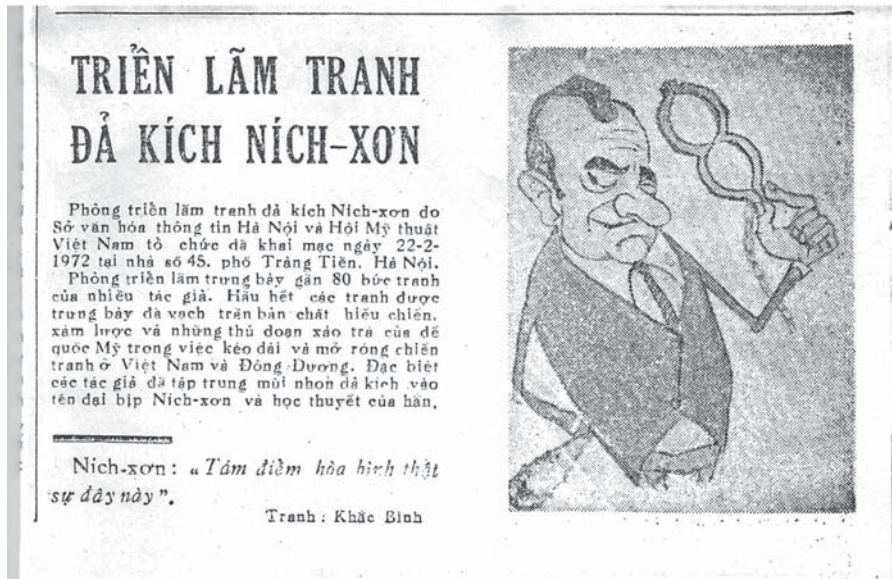
The cartoonists made a special effort to satirize President Nixon’s policies. On 22 February 1972, the Bureau of Culture and Information and the Association of Vietnamese Artists jointly organized a public exhibition of political cartoons in

119. David G. Marr, “A Passion for Modernity: Intellectuals and the Media,” in Hy V. Luong, ed., *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, 257–95: 261–2.

120. Kim N.B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945–1965*, Ann Arbor, MI: U. of Michigan P., 2002, 27.

121. *Ibid.*, 85.

## Exhibition of Artworks Opposing Nixon



**Image 1:** Nixon: “This is the True Focal Point for Peace.”

Artist: Khắc Bình. Published in *Nhan Dan* on 25 February 1972.

Reproduced with the permission of *Nhan Dan*, Hanoi.

Hanoi that had first appeared in the communist party newspaper, *Nhan Dan*. The exhibition presented eighty works on the theme of the Nixon Doctrine (see Image 1).<sup>122</sup> At a press conference in 1969, President Nixon had announced a doctrine stating that henceforth US allies would be expected to defend themselves, but the United States would still honor its treaty commitments and provide military and economic aid if requested. Under the Doctrine, the Nixon administration implemented the policy of Vietnamization that was aimed at gradually withdrawing US troops and left the government of South Vietnam to shoulder the burden of fighting the war. The Nixon Doctrine was neither a new initiative nor a major shift in US foreign policy.<sup>123</sup> Previous US administrations had applied or

122. Trien Lam Tranh Da Kich Nich-Xon, *Nhan Dan*, 25 February 1972, trang 4, So 6516, Thu Vien Quoc Gia (TVQG), Hanoi. [Artworks on Nixon’s War, *Nhan Dan*, 25 February 1972, 4, Number 6516, National Library, Hanoi].

123. See Jeffrey Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 1, 2006, 59–74; Jussi M. Hanhimaki, “An Elusive Grand Design,” in

attempted to apply the same doctrine in selected areas of the world. Moreover, Vietnamization was not even invented by the Nixon administration. Jeffrey Kimball has argued that it originated with the anti-war movement, congressional opponents of the war in Vietnam, and Johnson administration officials.<sup>124</sup> Nixon implemented Vietnamization only after other components of his strategy failed to produce victory and as members of his own administration and the public demanded that he withdraw US troops more rapidly. In the early 1950s, President Eisenhower had articulated a principle that would reappear in the Nixon Doctrine, stating that “[i]f there must be a war there in Asia, let it be Asians against Asians.”<sup>125</sup> To DRV cartoonists, it was obvious that the racism inherent within Eisenhower’s remark provided the doctrinal underpinning of Vietnamization.

Vietnamese scholars and cartoonists were aware of these nuances in US foreign policy. They were careful to distinguish between two elements of the US engagement with the wider world, its policy of intervention, and its idealistic rhetoric. Early twentieth-century Vietnamese scholars borrowed terms from Chinese scholars such as “My” (“beautiful”) to mean “America,” and “Hoa Ky” (“Flowery Flag”) for the United States.<sup>126</sup> In this way, the Vietnamese showed their admiration for the United States as a political model of an egalitarian society. Vietnamese scholars viewed presidents Abraham Lincoln and George Washington as inspirational figures who were honest and hardworking in their desire to create a country free from the militarism of European monarchies. But, following the US intervention in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese perception of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon was generally negative.

Informed by such narratives of US history, DRV resistance artworks did raise awareness among the Vietnamese populace about the nature of the US intervention. Their works, as the British political cartoonist Nicholas Garland has argued, contained a reverberating subversive power.<sup>127</sup> A cartoon by the Hanoi artist Huy

Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds, *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, New York: Oxford UP, 2008, 25–44: 26; Noam Chomsky, “Introduction,” in Virginia Brodine and Mark Selden, eds, *Open Secret: The Kissinger-Nixon Doctrine in Asia*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, 3–15: 6; and John Dower, “Asia and the Nixon Doctrine: The New Face of Empire,” in Brodine and Selden, eds, *Open Secret*, 134–165: 136. Also see the essays in Lloyd C. Gardner, ed. *The Great Nixon Turn-Around: America’s New Foreign Policy in the Post-Liberal Era*, New York: New Viewpoints, 1973.

124. See Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine.”

125. Dower, “Asia,” 136.

126. Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950*, Chapel Hill, NC: U. of North Carolina P., 2000, 17.

127. Garland, “Political Cartooning,” 76.

Quang in a special Tet issue of *Nhan Dan* in January 1972 showed the Nixon Doctrine in the metaphorical form of a rotten egg being eaten by a mouse.<sup>128</sup> North-Vietnamese guerrilla fighters were represented as a mouse, and the stale egg represented Vietnamization, which was an old policy that Nixon had dusted off and repackaged. As shown above in this article, the DRV was extremely worried about the likelihood of Vietnamization actually succeeding, and they had seen this policy in action in ARVN/US military incursions in Cambodia and Laos. In those two countries, PAVN forces were tied down in battles, and could not be sent into South Vietnam where they were supposed to go. A cartoon by Luong Khoi showed policies such as “Vietnamization” and “curb liberation movements” revolving inside Nixon’s head. The caption read: “The United States is looking forward to reducing global tensions, and improving relations with many countries that have various ideologies.”<sup>129</sup> Khoi saw the Nixon Doctrine as a continuation of existing US policy to intervene against national liberation struggles, albeit with scant success.

Accompanying the cartoons were editorial commentaries in *Nhan Dan* and in the DRV historical journal *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* that were devoted to exposing the lack of democracy, and the prevalence of authoritarianism and corruption in Saigon. A *Nhan Dan* article entitled “An Opera with Many Lies” commented, “Nixon’s biggest lie is that he would withdraw US troops and bring peace but in fact he has escalated the war.”<sup>130</sup> It added that Nixon had also lied that he would solve his domestic economic problems but in fact he had spent more money on the war in Vietnam, worsening the economic crisis in the United States. *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* played an influential role in explaining US foreign policy in South Vietnam. Historian Bui Dinh Thanh argued that although the Nixon Doctrine aimed to strengthen ARVN by implementing Vietnamization, the strategy failed because of the contradiction between methods and goals: the US goal was to set up an independent nation in South Vietnam, but it created a client state instead.<sup>131</sup> In another article, Thanh proclaimed that the North Vietnamese understood the Nixon Doctrine to mean that the United States, while training and financing

128. *Nhan Dan*, So Tet Nham Ty, trang 6, TVQG.

129. *Nhan Dan*, 31 January 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

130. *Nhan Dan*, 23 January 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

131. Bui Dinh Thanh, “*Xet Lai Khong Thanh Cong Chu Nghia Thuc Dan Moi Cua My O Viet-Nam*,” [“Reviewing the process of the failure of American neocolonialism in Vietnam”], *Nghien Cuu Lich Su* [from here: NCLS] 171, November–December 1976, 1–15 (Pho Trang Thi, Thu Vien Quoc Gia, Hanoi).

ARVN, would accept nothing less than a military victory in Vietnam.<sup>132</sup> Thanh's argument is supported by some historians of US foreign relations, who believe that the core principles of Nixon's Vietnam policy were threefold: that the United States must win the Vietnam War, that the war could be won if enough force was used, and that the end of the war should not be negotiated without military victory.

DRV artists frequently produced artworks commenting on US "hegemony" in South Vietnam, and the "collusionary" South-Vietnamese regime. A Khoi cartoon showed South-Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu guarding a ballot box labeled "free elections"; looming above the ballot box are two US-made rifles, and Nixon stands nearby clapping his hands in approval.<sup>133</sup> Khoi also created a cartoon showing South-Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky taking dollar bills from the hands of a US official, and licking the American's boots at the same time. Ky says, "Receiving American money is not evidence of slavery."<sup>134</sup>

Alongside these criticisms, DRV historian Quynh Cu argued that although the United States made a concerted effort to train ARVN officers in the United States, and to provide the best military equipment, the Thieu regime eroded the professionalism of the armed forces by arbitrarily dismissing officers. The fighting ability of ARVN was impaired because senior officers participated in business deals instead of building a professional force. Many officers operated snack bars, prostitution rackets, sauna houses, banks, and trading houses. Thirty percent of ARVN generals were millionaires.<sup>135</sup> Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had admitted in June 1967 that the Thieu-Ky government was "still largely corrupt, incompetent, and unresponsive to the needs and wishes of the people."<sup>136</sup>

The success of the exhibition of Nixon cartoons inspired artists in Hanoi to produce hundreds more. A cartoon by Xuan Hong showed an ARVN soldier hanging out of a US military helicopter. The caption: "US Department of Defense

132. Bui Dinh Thanh, "*Khoi Lien Hiep Quan Su—Cong Nghiep My Va Cuoc Chien Tranh Xam Luoc Viet-Nam*," ["The United States Military Industrial Complex and the Aggressive War in Vietnam"], *NCLS* 146, September–October 1972, 41–52.

133. *Nhan Dan*, 3 August 1969, trang 4, TVQG.

134. *Nhan Dan*, 24 July 1969, trang 4, TVQG.

135. Quynh Cu, "*Vai Tro Cua Doi Ngu Si Quan Nguy Trong Chinh Sach Thuc Dan Moi Cua My O Mien Nam Viet-Nam*," ["*The Role of Puppet Officer Corps in the United States Neocolonial Policy in South Vietnam*"], *NCLS* 171, November–December, 1976, 45–58.

136. Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia Since World War II*, New York: Columbia UP, 1999, 134.

says Vietnamization is hanging by a rope.”<sup>137</sup> Despite the efforts of the United States to train and fund the ARVN, Vietnamization was not a success.<sup>138</sup> John Dower posits that although the 1.1 million-man ARVN had been “wet-nursed” by the United States for more than a decade, it still could not stand up to the numerically—and technologically—inferior NLF.<sup>139</sup> Dower argues that the Nixon Doctrine had “a racist cast” because it aimed to save US dollars and lives while letting South Vietnamese die.<sup>140</sup> US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker’s comment that Vietnamization simply meant changing “the color of the corpses” illustrated the racism inherent in the doctrine. Bunker’s remark led critics of the Nixon administration to charge that Vietnamization, and the end of the draft, were just a way to preserve US lives while sacrificing Vietnamese ones.<sup>141</sup> Former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford told Congress in January 1969 that the policy made economic sense because an Asian soldier costs about 1/15th of his US counterpart.<sup>142</sup> Hanoi cartoonists proceeded to show that the PAVN would have little difficulty in defeating Vietnamization. An illustration by Tran Quyet Thang showed the Nixon Doctrine in the form of a dragon with Nixon’s face, and the people of Indochina ready to sever its head.<sup>143</sup> A cartoon by Tu Chong Lim showed President Thieu inside a US battle tank, screaming: “Americans, give me more cover fire! More cover fire! Vietnamization will succeed!”<sup>144</sup>

An integral component of Nixon’s policy was to inflict maximum damage to North Vietnam’s economic and military infrastructure through heavy aerial bombardment in order to bring Hanoi to the negotiation table in a weakened state. Reflecting on this policy, a Ngo Dinh Chuong illustration showed Nixon with two

137. *Nhan Dan*, 21 May 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

138. See Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army*, Lawrence, KS: UP of Kansas, 2006; Andrew A. Wiest, *Vietnam’s Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN*, New York: New York UP, 2007; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*; and Scott Sigmund Gartner, “Differing Evaluations of Vietnamization,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29, 1998, 243–62.

139. John Dower, “Asia and the Nixon Doctrine: The New Face of Empire,” 162.

140. *Ibid.*, 132.

141. David Greenberg, “Nixon as Statesman: The Failed Campaign,” in Logevall and Andrew Preston, eds, *Nixon in the World*, 45–66: 53; and Howard B. Schaffer, *Ellsworth Bunker: Global Troubleshooter, Vietnam Hawk*, Chapel Hill, NC: U. of North Carolina P., 2003.

142. Dower, “Asia,” 132.

143. *Nhan Dan*, 26 February 1972, trang 3, TVQG.

144. *Nhan Dan*, 10 April 1972, trang 4, TVQG.





**Image 2:** False Peace, Real War.

Artist: Ngo Dinh Chuong. Published in *Nhan Dan* on 3 March 1972.

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faces (see Image 2). The caption read, “False peace, real war.”<sup>145</sup> A cartoon by Tran Quyet Thang depicted Nixon and Thieu as Vietnamese street vendors carrying a bomb hanging from a pole resting on their shoulders (see Image 3). Its caption read, “Nixon vending peace.”<sup>146</sup> Using the theme of US hegemony, a Luong Khoi caricature showed the top leaders of the Saigon regime inside the pocket of President Johnson.<sup>147</sup> Another piece of Khoi’s artwork showed South Vietnamese President Thieu, Prime Minister Ky, and Vice President Tran Van Huong carrying bags of dollars with Johnson holding the three South Vietnamese

145. *Nhan Dan*, 3 March 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

146. *Nhan Dan*, 14 March 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

147. *Nhan Dan*, 11 November 1968, trang 4, TVQG.



**Image 3:** Nixon Selling Peace.

Artist: Tran Quyet Thanh. Published in *Nhan Dan* on 14 March 1972.

Reproduced with the permission of *Nhan Dan*, Hanoi.

leaders on a leash (see Image 4).<sup>148</sup> The cartoons denounced Johnson, Nixon, and Thieu in racialized language. A Khoi cartoon depicted Johnson and a chimpanzee climbing up a circus ladder. Johnson's wife, below, asks, "Lyndon where are you? On the right or on the left?"<sup>149</sup> A cartoon by Huy Quang depicted Nixon in the form of a pig beating a war drum while commanding an army of mice. Artist Nguyen Nghiem showed Thieu and his top officials as snakes in a barrel, armed with weapons and US dollars, while Nixon remarks, "This is my favorite model of government."<sup>150</sup>

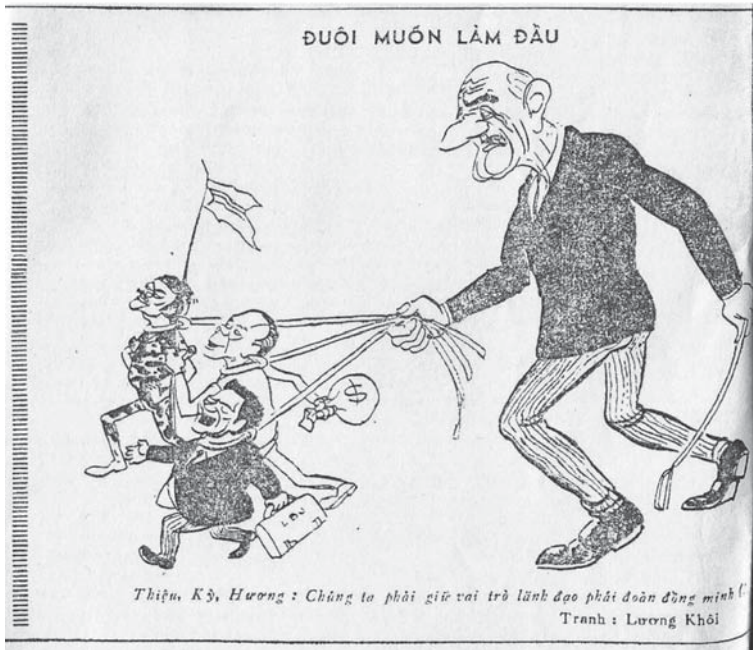
Historian Pham Quang Toan has explained the implications of the kind of "model government" the United States was setting up in Saigon. Toan argues that

148. *Nhan Dan*, 14 November 1968, trang 4, TVQG.

149. *Nhan Dan*, 29 January 1968, trang 4, TVQG.

150. *Nhan Dan*, 16 August 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

The Tail that wants to be the Head



**Image 4:** Thieu, Ky, Huong: “We must keep playing the leading role in our alliance [with the United States].”

Artist: Luong Khoi. Published in *Nhan Dan* on 14 November 1968.

Reproduced with the permission of *Nhan Dan*, Hanoi.

the United States “injected cultural and ideological toxins” into South Vietnam.<sup>151</sup> Primary-school textbooks taught anti-communism, and novels and movies produced by the United States and the Thieu regime were based on an anti-NLF theme. Historian Le Van Hao explained that US cultural propoganda encouraged the Vietnamese people to embrace capitalism, free trade, and individualism, and to adopt a US lifestyle.<sup>152</sup> In his analysis of the growth of the NLF, the scholar

151. Pham Quang Toan, “*Hau Qua 20 Nam ‘Binh Dinh’ Tan Bao Va Tham Doc Cua My-Nguy Doi Voi Nong Thon Mien Nam Viet-Nam,*” [“Consequences of the Pacification Policy of the American Puppet Regime in the rural areas of South Vietnam”], *NCLS* 171, November–December 1976: 45–58.

152. Le Van Hao, “*Xa Hoi Van Hoa Thanh Thi Mien Nam Viet-Nam Duoi Su Thong Tri Cua Chu Nghia Thuc Dan Moi Hoa-Ky*” [“Society and Culture in the Cities of South Vietnam Under the Administration of United States Neocolonialism”], *NCLS* 119, 1969: 23–36.

Nguyen Hoai has argued that US culture did not stand a chance of taking root in Vietnam because the NLF had adopted a policy to “erase American culture” and establish a national progressive culture based on reforming the education system and publishing domestic literary works.<sup>153</sup>

The editors of *Nhan Dan* were avid connoisseurs of the Nixon Doctrine. They closely tracked the debate over the doctrine in the US press, and they reprinted cartoons from US newspapers. *Nhan Dan* ran a *Chicago Daily News* cartoon showing Nixon as a medical doctor trying to revive his Indochina policy that is personified as a skeleton. In it, Nixon remarks, “I am trying to make his last minutes comfortable.”<sup>154</sup> Another US cartoon, reprinted in *Nhan Dan*, shows Vietnamization personified as a rapidly melting snowman. Its caption is, “Vietnamization policy: An iceman in hell.”<sup>155</sup> *Nhan Dan* also lifted from the US press a cartoon of Nixon as a stone-age man about to throw a bomb. The caption reads, “Bombing ‘em back to the stone age!”<sup>156</sup> In another US cartoon, Nixon and Treasury Secretary John Connally are trying to keep a huge tree from falling on the house of their economic policy. Nixon comments nonchalantly, “We should talk about this situation.”<sup>157</sup>

Some North-Vietnamese cartoons focused on the domestic economic and political crises facing President Nixon. Pham Vinh portrayed Nixon as a weightlifter sliding down a slippery slope while struggling to carry weights such as the “dollar crisis” and Watergate.<sup>158</sup> Pham Quoc Ky showed Nixon pushing a presidential car that had run of gas.<sup>159</sup> Dang Trong Khiem depicted Nixon pleading “that’s enough,” as Judge John Sirica, who presided over the Watergate hearings, pulls out Nixon’s tongue.<sup>160</sup> Phan Hong showed Nixon suffering from leprosy as his fingers and toes, with names like Haldeman and Ehrlichman, are falling off

153. Nguyen Hoai, “Tu Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong Den Chinh Phu Cach Mang Lam Thoi Cong Hoa Mien Nam Viet-Nam” [“From the National Liberation Front to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam”], *NCLS* 153, November–December 1973: 1–14.

154. *Nhan Dan*, 3 January 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

155. *Nhan Dan*, 23 May 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

156. *Nhan Dan*, 8 January 1973, trang 4, TVQG.

157. *Nhan Dan*, 3 January 1972, trang 4, TVQG.

158. *Nhan Dan*, 14 November 1973, trang 4, TVQG.

159. *Nhan Dan*, 12 November 1973, trang 4, TVQG.

160. *Nhan Dan*, 8 November 1973, trang 4, TVQG.



**Image 5:** Contagious Disease: Nixon’s Falling Fingers and Toes.  
 Artist: Phan Hong. Published in *Nhan Dan* on 31 October 1973.  
 Reproduced with the permission of *Nhan Dan*, Hanoi.

(see Image 5).<sup>161</sup> DRV newspaper commentators and historians interpreted the portrayal by the cartoons of the impact of the war on the US economy. While *Nhan Dan* commented that the Vietnam War had resulted in “gold bleeding” and the precious metal fleeing the United States to safer havens abroad, historian Bui Dinh Thanh argued that the Vietnam War had helped the US economy by increasing defense production and spending.<sup>162</sup> DRV historians explained that, in the end, the United States had to “sacrifice its satellite” in Saigon, which essentially was a product of the US war in Vietnam.

161. *Nhan Dan*, 31 October 1973, trang 4, TVQG.

162. *Nhan Dan*, 20 November 1973, trang 4, TVQG; and Bui Dinh Thanh, “*Khoi Lien Hiep Quan Su—Cong Nghiep My Va Cuoc Chien Tranh Xam Luoc Viet-Nam*,” [“The US Military-Industrial Complex, and the Aggressive War in Vietnam”], NCLS 146, September–October 1972: 41–52.

This article has demonstrated the use of humor as a strategy to resist the US project to create a non-communist state in South Vietnam. To achieve this goal, the North Vietnamese developed a range of cultural products of humor, such as books, novels, cartoons, and artworks. While many Americans believed that communist societies lacked the ability to laugh, the North Vietnamese have shown a capacity to laugh not just at outsiders but also at themselves. The record of the peace talks demonstrates that the North Vietnamese negotiators matched, and sometimes outwitted, US negotiators in the art of humor. North Vietnamese humor in these settings was spontaneous. These important encounters enable us to better understand North Vietnamese behavior under fire.