THE NIXON SEMINAR

on Conservative Realism and National Security

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How Wars End: Lessons from Vietnam and Afghanistan

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Mary: Good evening, and welcome to The Nixon Seminar on Conservative Realism and National Security. I'm your host, Mary Kissel, with Stephens Inc. We're honored to once again have Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador O'Brien co-chairing this discussion alongside our outstanding seminar members. And today we're marking the 50th anniversary of the Paris Peace Accords and the end of American involvement in the ground war in Vietnam. What are the lessons of that war? How do wars end? Or, given the Chinese spy balloon that floated over our nation this week, how do wars begin? So, Secretary Pompeo, I'm gonna start with you, sir. Vietnam, Nixon wrote a book called "No More Vietnams," and he said very clearly, "We won that war. It wasn't us that lost it. It was Congress that lost it." Do you agree?

Secretary Pompeo: [inaudible 00:01:05] agree on this. I've read Nixon's book there. I read his subsequent writings on this same issue as well. I don't know that you can pin the blame on Congress. When he says, "We won it," it's not clear exactly what he meant by "we" either. In the end, and we certainly faced this when we were in office, we had a conflict that had been dragging on for decades. American people thought there were too many lives lost. Striking similarities, very different context, but striking similarities in terms of American popular opinion. I think Nixon had the objective right. And that's always the challenge, is to say, "What are we there for? What is the goal? What's the objective? What does winning look like? What is the cost of failure to win?" And I

described that...I use that very carefully, as opposed to losing, right, there's also all this gray area, which is, you did lose, but you certainly did better than had you done nothing.

And I think if you characterize it the way Nixon did in that interview, we certainly ended up, we, the West, America ended up in a far better place as a result of the decisions we made strategically. Whether every tactical decision was right, every resource allocation was right, whether we had it right in the end of the '60s or the beginning of the '70s, which were two very different parts of the conflict, those are for historians to debate. In the end, I think the objective, the reason that we went to fight there, was real and important. We're seeing this same conflict play out in Ukraine today. And leaders, statesmen have to try to get right what it means if you do nothing, make that case to the American people, and in this instance, I think President Nixon has done, as a historical matter, a nice job of explaining why the work, all the cost that he accounted for there, all those costs were worthy, and put America in a better place than it would've been without them.

Mary: Well, it is true... And Nixon says in his book, "No More Vietnams," I commend it to everybody to read, the remarkable fact that, over these, I think five presidencies, the aim was very clear. It was to stop the spread of communism through Indo-China. Ambassador O'Brien, Secretary Pompeo was alluding to the potential parallel with the war in Afghanistan. It lasted over several presidencies. Was the aim there similarly always clear, always agreed on, regardless of whether or not the president was a Republican or a Democrat?

Ambassador O'Brien: Well, I think if you're asking about Afghanistan, Mary, the aim was clear. We'd suffered a grievous attack on the homeland in 9/11. The attack had been originated and planned in Afghanistan. Our goal was to make sure that Afghanistan could never be a safe haven again for terrorists and for those who would do harm to Americans or allies. And in that sense we were successful. Like Nixon said with Vietnam, in Afghanistan, we were successful. We eliminated Al-Qaeda as a functioning element, although remnants remained, and we made sure that there was not an attack on the American homeland. We did it at a very high cost. And part of that is because the goals in Afghanistan changed. It changed from making sure that Afghanistan could longer be a safe haven, and to a point where we wanted to build a nation in Afghanistan.

And I was part of that in the Bush administration. I spent many years working on a rule-of-law program in Afghanistan, trying to help the Afghans develop a country that they could be proud of, a democracy, a country that respected the rule of law. And we made a lot of strides. And there were a lot of brave Afghans that, they were there on our side. But at the end of the day, it was the Afghans themselves that had to build their own country, that had to secure their freedom, to secure their democracy. We were

there to help 'em. And, you know, we came up with a brave peace agreement at the end of the Trump administration. That peace agreement led to no combat deaths for Americans in Afghanistan for almost the entire year, something I'm proud of. I know Secretary Pompeo is proud of it.

And when we left office, there were 2,500 American troops there, 5,000 NATO troops. And there was a peace process in place between the government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. And unfortunately, like in Vietnam, once a president left, like when Nixon left, and when Ford could no longer get the funding he needed from Congress to support our South Vietnamese allies, when President Trump left, and his national security team, with Mike and Ratcliffe and myself, and Haspel and others left, that, the stiffening mechanism, that ability to help the Afghans fight for their freedom, evaporated. And so, like in Vietnam, we lost a war that we'd made great advances, you know, in, with blood and treasure. But again, at the end of the day, like in Vietnam, Afghanistan was a case of the Afghans having to want it themselves more than we did.

And unfortunately, there were just too many folks in Afghanistan that weren't willing to fight and lay down the last full measure of devotion. Many were, but they didn't have enough to stop the tide of the Taliban at the end.

Mary: Well, Bridge, I know that Vietnam is one of your favorite topics. And there are a lot of strands to pull here. We'll try to get to as many as possible in this seminar. We hope we have a lively debate tonight. But on that parallel with the Afghans and their will to fight, to make the ultimate sacrifice, is there a parallel here also with Vietnam that the French, not to beat up on the French, but it can be fun, that they were not prepared, really, for self-rule? And so, when the Communists and Ho Chi Minh tried to come in, well, they couldn't fight back properly, that they needed our help to push back that wave?

Elbridge: Well, thanks Mary. It's great to be with everyone this evening. And, I mean, I think Vietnam is just a conflict and a topic that I do think the American people, but certainly the American national security decision-makers would do well to kind of, you know, study and reflect on. It was such a dominating part of our mindset. Obviously, President Nixon felt so much of the brunt of that. But it's kind of fading with the generations. I mean, obviously you have people who are older, who served there, but younger generations, it's not nearly the kind of searing experience that it was for Americans. And I think what, you know, what to me is so important about it, and I think President Nixon was really astute about this, was trying to always reconcile, you know, what our strategic interests were in the world, but also a sense of what the American people would sustain.

The sort of tragedy that President Nixon and, you know, his team, but President Nixon himself personally, was that he did not preside over the initiation or the initial years of that war, which, you know, I mean, there's still debate about it, but, you know, under General Westmoreland and President Johnson's administration, you know, pursued search and destroy missions and so forth, and in a sense, I think you could say wasted American resolve and support for the war. The war in Vietnam was very popular in 1965, '66, '67. But by the time President Nixon...You know, President Johnson decided not to run for reelection, I mean, a historic decision, because of Vietnam, basically. By the time President Nixon got in there, he was bearing an albatross that was not of his own making. And I think that, in a sense, that helped contribute to, you know, the ultimate tragedy of his presidency and so forth.

But I think he deserves a lot of credit. And, I mean, I think there is an element in... You know, there's an argument that, you know, through the policies of Vietnamization under people like General Abrams in South Vietnam, and the willingness to do very controversial things at the time, like the invasion of, or intervention into Cambodia and Laos, the bombings of North Vietnam, the unrestricted bombings of North Vietnam, Linebacker II and so forth, and Dewey Canyon, if I remember the operations correctly, that by, you know, January 1973, although the peace agreement was very imperfect, North Vietnamese forces were still in South Vietnamese territory, it gave the South Vietnamese a fighting chance. And they had done well in the Easter Offensive of 1972. But of course, with Watergate and so forth, Congress turned against support for the war. And I think, as Secretary Pompeo rightly puts it, I mean, there are multiple reasons why that happened. It can't all be blamed on Congress. It reflected the will of the American people.

But I think the lesson here is, I mean, we should be, you know, we as the American people, and strategic, kind of, thinkers and decision-makers, we should really be careful and judicious and strategic not only in the use of American force, but also of American willpower and political support. And I think that's one of the real lessons of Vietnam. The other is something we've talked about before, which is, in order to get peace, sometimes you need to escalate. And I think the, you know, the story of 1972, in some ways, 1970 and the war in Cambodia, are examples where President Nixon and his team were willing to do aggressive things, precisely to deescalate the war, and at least in the time, it seemed to have worked. You know, in retrospect, it didn't work. But, you know, who knows what the alternate history would've been?

Mary: I always defer to the co-chairs. So, if Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador O'Brien wanna jump in, just jump in and talk over me. But until you do, I do wanna go over to Nadia Schadlow, or, like Matt Pottinger, former Deputy National Security Advisor, and dig in on this point of public support and how do you gauge it. Nixon said, "American leaders cannot wage war without the solid support of public opinion. And the American

people will go to war only if they're convinced it's a just cause." Nadia, how do you measure that? When you were looking, you know, from the White House at that situation in Afghanistan, how do you gauge support for the war and whether or not you should pay heed to it or ignore it?

Nadia: Thanks, Mary. I mean, I think I'll take a little bit of a different tack, because I think partly, public support we've seen is very much linked to leadership and to the explanation of a war. So it very much depends on your political leaders and how they explain a war and what's at stake. But I think there are four aspects of Vietnam that were relevant to Afghanistan, and also relevant to whether or not a public is likely to support a war. Partly it's going in and recognizing these consistent features of war. One, I'll call strategic depth, right? So, Vietnam, for a long time, until President Nixon came into power, there was a problem of North Vietnamese supply lines, right? Not being cut off in Laos and Cambodia. [inaudible 00:11:39] that was very important. We see a parallel in Afghanistan vis-a-vis Pakistan, right? And we probably even see a parallel today in terms of Ukraine and Russia, and the strategic depth that Russia has.

Second, stabilization matters in war. And this is where we get into the uncomfortable situation of when do things cross over to nation-building, or when do things cross over to a sense of stabilization, to prevent insurgencies from reemerging in a country, let's say, to prevent terrorists from retaking hold in a country. So, Congress, by not recognizing their role in that stabilization down the line in Vietnam, by pulling support in '74, '75, arguably created what we saw of the failures. So, again, if there's no scientific perfect line of stabilization, but it matters. And consistently, in every war that America has had to fight, our military, our Army, our Marines, our Navy, have had to deal with the problem of political stabilization in war, virtually every single war.

Third, COIN, counterinsurgency, CORDS. What we learned in Vietnam about the importance of military and political integration, the CORDS model... CORDS, it stood for the... Someone help me, what CORDS stood for. Matt, do you remember? It was a, really, C-O-R-D-S, really important model. I'll remember it in the middle, in a minute. What was interesting about that is we actually did not follow that model in Afghanistan. We did not have the level of civil and military integration that we had in Vietnam. And then, fourth, to Bridge's point, there was an incrementalism, right? The problem of incrementalism. So now, in the war with Ukraine and Russia, what's interesting is that the President has used his what's called draw-down authority, 30 times. Thirty times.

So there's a sense of incrementalism, which is an intention, with Bridge's point, about deciding what you wanna do up front, providing what you need up front. And, you know, there is some risk involved in that. But the risk of incrementalism could also be escalation and failure. So I think those are four sort of lessons that I think about in terms of Vietnam, and think that are relevant to today.

Mary: Yeah. It's such a complex topic. We can go in so many directions. Matt, you served in Afghanistan. Did what Nadia say resonate with you, particularly this idea of, you know, that you have to win the people's hearts, not just bomb the enemy? I mean, Nixon talked about that a lot, that that was something that the communists did very well in Vietnam, but that we didn't pay much attention to, and it hurt us in the long run.

Matt: Yeah. You know, well, CORDS, I have to admit, I couldn't remember what it stood for, but I did remember that Bridge Colby's grandfather was either the director or the deputy director of it at one point. But it was the civil...It was what you're talking about, Nadia, and what you wrote about very well in your book, "War and the Art of Governance," right? Which is a great read just about how do you consolidate your battlefield victories into a political victory that can be sustained? But Mary, it's all of these things that you're hearing about, it's what Nadia's talking about, where you need to have leadership that can explain why we're making the sacrifices that we ended up making after we were attacked by Al-Qaeda, which was harbored by the Taliban. You know, NATO, which had never, we'd never invoked the Article Five collective defense provision of that treaty until we were attacked in 9/11.

And then once you're in war, it's critical that you try to build a narrative that is gonna carry the local population along with a new government. And so, you know, it was very painful that Afghanistan ended the way that it did. I don't think it had to end that way. And I do think that there were ways for us to keep a government in place with minimal U.S. effort, you know, an effort, again, of Americans providing material support and diplomatic support, and some military support, in order to prevent, you know, a return to the status quo ante, where you've got terrorists harboring in this remote country. Ukraine, it's a similar scenario, in the sense that, what Nadia just said struck me, the idea of the strategic defense. We're now seeing "The Wall Street Journal" over the weekend had a good report citing data from a civil society organization called "C4ADS," which found that China is providing an increasing amount of material support for Russia's war against Europe.

And we should not make the same mistake that we made by permitting Pakistan to become really the safe haven for the Taliban and other terrorist elements. We should not allow China to provide that kind of strategic depth to allow Putin to prosecute this war against Europe and to try to fulfill his dream of building a new Russian empire. President Biden's threatened, early, in, you know, a year ago, when the invasion, the reinvasion occurred, he made a very good statement saying that he was going to hit China hard. In fact, he told Xi Jinping in a call that he would hit China if China provided, you know, that kind of material support to Russia. That material support's now happening. And so the piecemeal sanctions of just these, you know, these obscure Chinese companies is clearly not going to be sufficient. I think it needs to be a more

systemic signal and action that the United States takes in order to impose costs on China's meddling and trying to sow chaos in Europe.

Mary: So, lots of lessons here, and we're only 20 minutes in. To Bridge's point, you know, to actually get peace, you may need to escalate. You need public support. Nadia is raising the issue of strategic depth, as you say, Matt, of stabilization, of effective counterinsurgency tactics, and also the danger of incrementalism. So I'm gonna hand all of that over to you, Alex Wong, because you wanted to jump in. Over to you, Alex.

Alex: Yeah. You know, all great topics. You know, we could spend hours talking about all the items that people have brought up. I did want to go back to that term, "just war," that President Nixon used, and that you asked about, Mary, and trying to define that. And, you know, look, there are moral, philosophical definitions and theories. There are political science theories that you could apply to that term. But at the end of the day, it is a political question. It is one that the American people, through our democracy, through the debates in Congress, come to a determination of what is just. What should we take up arms to defend?

And, you know, I think the American people have a very finely-tuned ear for this. You know, it's multiple motivations, multiple feelings, but they come, generally, to the right decision on the mix of our interests, as well as the ideals that we want to defend across the world when we do take up arms. So it's incumbent upon leaders to explain the reasons why they go to war, as people have said, but also to listen to the American people, to keep an ear to that political ground. Now, this is described, and I think viewed by many of our adversaries around the world who are not democracies, as a weakness, as a liability for democratic leaders as they try to prosecute war. I actually think it's an advantage in the long term. As the political leaders stay attuned to the people of the country, they can make smarter decisions, strategic decisions, whether to press forward or move back.

If you're a dictator, the gap between you and the people is wider. And perhaps we're seeing that right now in Russia. You see the body bags that, or you hear about them anecdotally, at least, that are going back to Russia, or not going back at all. You hear about the hundreds of thousands of fighting-age men who are trying to leave Russia. That signs to me that there's a strong disconnect between the Russian population and the decisions being made by Vladimir Putin with his war and his invasion in Ukraine. And that's a weakness for him domestically. And whether he's attuned to that, or can be attuned to that with the information systems he has going up to him, and whether he's even able to or cares to make decisions taking that into account, that is a liability for him. And it's a strength for us that we have democracy informing the strategic decisions of our leaders.

Mary: Yeah, but bad regimes can fight on for a long time, Alex. And now I'm gonna put the secretary on the spot. Matt raised the role of China. You know, China was instrumental in propping up Ho Chi Min and arming the North Vietnamese. And now you see, you know, a different iteration of communist leadership in Beijing, as Matt, you know, pointed out, backing the aggression against Ukraine. So, you know, how do you think about those parallels and the lessons that we might have learned from how the communists intervened in Vietnam and how they're intervening now?

Secretary Pompeo: Yeah. Certainly true. We've seen this in the Chinese Communist Party. We shouldn't forget that they were around Afghanistan too. Neighborhood's pretty darn close. Close support, financial support for Pakistan throughout the whole thing, that was among the Achilles' heels of our efforts in Afghanistan. So, I guess we've talked about three conflicts, and the Chinese Communist Party is now three for three. I wanted to add to something I think that Matt and Nadia were both getting at. There is a difference, too, in how information flows today. But I think one thing comes... When you read the histories of Vietnam, the American public, and frankly, the public around the world, often it gets boiled down to two words, "troop strength." It used to frustrate me enormously in Afghanistan. The entire debate would be about how many boots do you have on the ground?

And yet it didn't remotely reflect the nuance, the texture of all the things that we were trying to achieve, the political ends that we had, the diplomatic efforts we were engaged in. This was certainly true in Vietnam as well. These conflicts don't happen in a vacuum. We've talked about China, but [inaudible 00:23:05] broader Asia involved in each of these as well. Look at the conflict today that's taking place in Libya. Everybody and their brother sent weapons there, frankly, except us. These conflicts almost always take place against a complex geopolitical backdrop. And to bring it down to what "The New York Times" or "Washington Post" will write is that they, "300 more soldiers today in Syria," "150 more soldiers today in Afghanistan," is a disservice to the American people. And this is where we get back to what Nadia was speaking to. Leaders have a responsibility to tell that story, to narrate, factually, the purpose and the resources that are being required to actually achieve that purpose, and give it to the American people in a candid, straightforward way.

And then you get to Alex's point. American people are pretty good at taking that information on board. Different folks will sort it out in different ways, but you absolutely have to get that right. And when you get to the end, Mary, one of your first questions to me was, how do these end? They all end the same way, with some folks sitting at a table someplace, sometimes inside the country, sometimes outside the country, and making a decision based on relative power, relative strength, what can be achieved, and the ends not only of the parties actually in the conflict, in our case, the various ethnicities, the various tribes, the various groups, armed and unarmed, inside of

Afghanistan or in Vietnam, the various folks, all trying to sort out for them, what does stability look like in the aftermath of external intervention in our country?

And those are hard conversations. We've been criticized. I've been personally criticized for "the deal we struck with the Taliban" many times. The deal we struck with the Taliban was structured in a way to try and preserve America's interests, in the same way that the Paris Peace Accords were designed to protect America's interests and all the sacrifice we'd made there as well. But we all, political leaders who are faced with these responsibilities, have to remember that it is almost certain that total victory will be unachievable. I can think of just a couple of examples in all of history where that was the outcome that ultimately delivered the final blow in a conflict. And so you need to be putting yourself in a position where the political leadership inside of the organization that you are trying to help be successful is sufficient.

And I'll close with this. I've gone on too long. Think of Ukraine today. When this ends, President Zelensky will have the people of Ukraine turn to him and say, "How the heck did we get here? My sister was killed. My cousin died in combat. My city is destroyed, my children taken off to Russia." There will be lots of hard questions about how the political leadership did not achieve the objective they told them they could achieve. And so, for the United States, we need to be thinking today, when this ends, and I agree, I think, with most of the folks here, although many inside my party disagree, the incrementalism, we've been too slow, too late. We haven't provided nearly enough for the Ukrainians to be "victorious." But we need to be focused, too, on the things that matter to America, and how we end this in a way that creates deterrence for a time. It's never forever. Deterrence for 2 years, 5 years, 10 years, not just a ceasefire for a month or 6 months. And if we get those things right, it will have turned on the fact that we built up the Ukrainian political leadership in a way that they can sustain that deterrence when it's the case that the weapon systems are no longer flowing.

Mary: There's a lot there to analyze. But to go to one of your points, which is that it's essential for leaders to explain what is going on, Richard Nixon gave several major television addresses to explain what was going on. And yet, as he, I think, rightly said, Vietnam ended up being "the most lied-about war in our nation's history." And he remarked on the U.S. press. He said, "We advertise our faults, but they," meaning the communists, "they bury theirs." And so I think it was very difficult for him to rally the American people. Ambassador O'Brien, I'll give you the hot potato. I mean, is it possible today, in this media environment, to do what the secretary is saying, to get out, to talk to the American people and have your message resonate, if it's something that our national press just doesn't happen to agree with? And then Kim Reed, I'm coming to you.

Ambassador O'Brien: Well, listen, it's a great question. But it also goes to this idea of winning wars. And I was on one of the popular shows last night, and the host gave a kind of a tirade that we don't win any wars anymore. It's something that Mike echoed in his comments. And I think one of the reasons why we're not winning is because we're not using all the tools in our toolkit to win a war. We're really compartmentalizing. And it goes to Mike's point about the 350 more troops in Afghanistan, or 150 more troops to fight Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and we're not looking at the big picture. So, if you take Ukraine, for example, and this goes to what Matt and Nadia talked about, and Alex, to some extent, you know, what's happening?

We compartmentalized Ukraine. Ukraine's being supplied massively by Iran, a sworn enemy of ours, a country that wants to do no good to American citizens, here, and our former leaders, and otherwise, that is engaged in malign activity all over the region. And they're now gonna build a factory, according to the press reports today, that's gonna produce 6,000 drones a year in Russia, for no other reason than to kill civilians and take out infrastructure in Russia...right, in Ukraine on behalf of the Russians. Now, what are we doing with Iran? We've got Rob Malley and the European diplomats, the EU diplomats, literally begging the Iranians to enter into a deal with us so that we can relax our sanctions and give the Iranians, you know, hundreds of billions of dollars in sanctions relief, at a time that they're actively engaged in a war against Ukraine, where the American taxpayers are being asked to pay greatly.

That's something people don't understand. And it doesn't make any sense. But we've compartmentalized it, and this idea of, well, we can have the JCPOA and go back to the good old days, so to speak, under the Obama administration with Iran, that never existed. And then we've got China. China just floated a surveillance balloon with three school buses full of collection equipment. Could have easily had an EMP in it, and floated it across our entire country. Now, they didn't float it. They maneuvered it. They drove it across the country. This didn't blow off course. This was being maneuvered by propeller, by propulsion.

And yet we've got John Kerry and his climate change team over in Iran, or excuse me, over in China, begging the Chinese to build one less coal plant a month. You know, just build one coal plant a month. Don't build two. And if you do that, and you promise by, you know, 2100 that you'll switch to green energy, you know, we'll give you whatever you want. And the Chinese are sending massive amounts of material to the Russians, and trading with them, and keeping Putin afloat. So it's hard for the American people to understand that this war in Ukraine is so crucial and so critical, and we've gotta make these massive sacrifices of our resources for Ukraine, but at the same time, we're turning a blind eye to Iran and China. It makes no sense. So, it's this compartmentalization that we can just throw a few more troops, throw another HIMARS

or two, throw a Patriot system or two to Ukraine, and that'll end the war, and yet turn a blind eye to what Iran is doing, to what China's doing to support Russia.

It's really ridiculous. And we're not gonna win the war. We're gonna lose this war like we've lost other wars, because we're not taking a holistic look at the problem. And if there's a war that's important enough for us to get involved in, important us for us to commit our treasure and commit the blood of our young men and women from places like Kansas and Utah and Arkansas, and the inner cities, to go fight and die, then we ought to be able to back them up, not just with the tools that they need, the weapons, but to back 'em up with the diplomacy and the economic packages, to ensure that, you know, our enemy is cut off from their sources of support. So, I think we gotta stop this compartmentalization and this incremental approach. And if a war's worth fighting, let's fight it and win it, and, you know, get out of the kind of Vietnam syndrome, get out of this latest Afghan syndrome, and start being the United States of America again.

Mary: You know, I'm so glad that you raised that phrase, the Vietnam syndrome. Whether it's right or wrong, the popular perception is that we lost the war in Vietnam. Although President Nixon disagreed very, very strongly with that. And Kim Reed, it does seem like it impacted how we think about war and how we think about the exercise of U.S. power. I mean, does Vietnam still echo today in the way that President Biden, as Ambassador O'Brien just said, is using a very incrementalist, very careful approach?

Kim: Absolutely, Mary. Ambassador O'Brien and I had the honor of visiting Vietnam together in 2020. And we met with Prime Minister, then Prime Minister Phuc, and had some very good conversations. I brought to it, being the head of the Export-Import Bank, the importance of buying American, and working with democratic nations to ensure China doesn't have overdue influence in the world. And as we look 20, 25 minutes from now, I'll be watching closely, and I'm sure a lot of us will be watching closely, what President Biden has to say during the State of the Union.

I'm happy to see that for the second time, the First Lady is inviting Ambassador Oksana Markarova of Ukraine to sit in her box. So, that's the main guest when it comes to foreign affairs and foreign issues, who will be one of the president's guests there. And, you know, we know he's committed $24 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, but we now have a Republican House of Representatives. And I was up on the Hill this morning with two new freshmen offices. We have a lot of education to do as we look at the lessons of Afghanistan, look at the lessons of Vietnam, and what makes sense going forward. So, I know that all of us care about that. I care about it from an economic front. And I was heartened today that the new chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, Patrick McHenry, reintroduced a bill, the International Nuclear Energy Financing Act, which would give the ability for the World Bank and other international financial institutions to finance nuclear power projects.

Ex-Im does that for the United States, but I think, hopefully, we're gonna get the World Bank to be a player, as we look at the hopeful outcome in Ukraine, where we wanna see economic success. I also today was just with the State Secretary of the German Federal Ministry of Finance, Professor Hölscher. And I asked her this very question, because I told her, "You know, I'm focused on Ukraine and economic recovery and prosperity." And she nailed it, and I was happy to hear, when she said, "We need to fill that gap through jobs and development, so that China does not go into Ukraine." So I was happy to see her say that. And we know that Ukraine wants to join the EU, and I think that would be another step important to helping that country be stabilized, and move in a good direction.

Mary: Well, all good points, and points taken. And it sounds, Kim, and from others' comments, that it all comes back to leadership, as Secretary Pompeo so eloquently pointed out. Bridge, on that point, there's another parallel here to Vietnam, which is that Nixon really had to go to the Pentagon and force them to escalate in the way that he thought would be helpful to forcing the North Vietnamese to the table, namely, you know, bombing the supply lines and taking other action that prior presidents just refused to take. But he really had to lean on the Pentagon to do it. You know, is that a lesson that, say, President Biden could learn today? I mean, he ordered the Pentagon to take down the spy balloon, and they, like, waited a couple days to do it. Is there a parallel there, too, about the relationship between the White House and other parts of the executive branch?

Elbridge: Yeah, I think that's a very good point, Mary. And I would draw, kind of, out your point a little bit. I mean, I'm a little bit more dour assessment than some about where the war is likely to go. Unfortunately, it seems the administration, Secretary-General Stoltenberg, European officials, experts, are indicating the war is likely to be protracted. I hope that's wrong. I hope there's a significant breakthrough, and a settlement on favorable terms along the lines of what Secretary Pompeo was talking about. It has to be realistic. But I fear that's not where you would put your bets at this point. And I think the lesson of Vietnam here, and, I mean, they're not exact parallels, obviously, so I wouldn't wanna suggest they are. But, you know, President Eisenhower said something that I think President Nixon was fond of quoting, but that, you know, getting into a war, you don't know how it's gonna develop.

And I think we can see that, and we should anticipate that here. And, you know, I think there have been some saying that, you know, we could decisively wrap up this conflict and then focus on China. I think that's unlikely. And even if there is a decisive breakthrough, the Russians are not likely to go away. They're entering into national mobilization, and they're resolute. And, I mean, you look at North Vietnam. I mean, the fundamental miscalculation, to me, on the part of the Johnson and Kennedy administration, I mean, the "best and the brightest," I mean, McNamara, Bundy, you

know, John McNaughton and all these brilliant whiz kids and so forth, was that they could manipulate North Vietnamese and Vietnamese communist opinion. And the simple fact was, as Ho Chi Min famously said, you know, "We'll lose 10 people for every 1 you lose of yours, and still keep going."

And so, you know, the infamous McNamara, going to Hanoi and saying, "We made a mistake." And the North Vietnamese and the Vietnamese were like, "No, we didn't make a mistake. We were prepared to do that." And so, a fundamental failure to reckon, you know, as H.R. McMaster puts it, a lack of strategic empathy, if you will, for the opponent. And I think, you know, I don't think there's a direct, you know, one-to-one parallel in the case of Ukraine, but there's the potential for escalation or protraction of the conflict. I think the points about negotiation that Secretary Pompeo made are very on point. And I think there is an element... And in fact, Tom Friedman, not my favorite columnist, personally, but he quoted, you know, the JFK inaugural address, about "bear any burden and support any friend." And that phrase became infamous over the course of the Vietnam War, because it was so mismatched, ultimately, with the conflict, and with what people were willing to sustain over time. Sort of ash in the mouth, to use a Kennedy phrase.

Today, has the rhetoric, and has, now this war taken on, I mean, what the Russians are doing is evil, no question. I mean, abominable. But on the other hand, if there's going to be a political solution along the lines of what Secretary Pompeo's... And by the way, what I think the administration is starting to telegraph, through friendly columnists like David Ignatius and Hal Brands, they're starting to prepare the way for this. How do you make that transition? And I think that's something in Vietnam that was a really difficult point. You know, you go from these guys, you know, it's communism, you know, monolithic communism, to saying, "We're gonna break that off."

And I think, you know, in that context, it is worth going back to the Weinberger or Powell Doctrine, I mean, the experience of Vietnam. And there were bad elements of the Vietnam syndrome. You know, as President Ford said, the "long national nightmare," or President Bush, in his speech about Desert Storm, said, you know, "We've broken the Vietnam syndrome." But there were elements of Vietnam that were chastening, and made us think about it, and ultimately, we won the Cold War. Just a little story of my own. When I was doing the National Defense Strategy, I took the chance to go to see Andrew Marshall, the famous Pentagon strategist, who'd started working at the Pentagon in 1973, had been working in RAND since the '50s. You know, and I said, "You know, was there a way for us to win the Cold War without getting out of Vietnam?"

And he basically said, "No." And he said that, "We may have to do something analogous in the contemporary period, to focus." And this was, you know, I mean, one of the great strategic, you know, minds. But I think that process of saying, what is it that

we're trying to achieve? What is it that we're trying to do? What are we prepared to do? That's so critical. But it goes against the incrementalism that, to your point, is often politically feasible and easier. And I think, without being...I mean, it's particularly, administrations like the current one, or the Obama administration, the Johnson administration, they sort of analyze everything to death. They're very process-oriented. And that can lead... we Republicans make our own mistakes, but that's, I think, something important.

The last thing I would say is it's worth pointing out...I mean, and thanks to Matt. I don't claim any special knowledge. You know much more about pacification and all that, that, you and Nadia, than I do. But I would say, one thing my grandfather did actually used to say is, "Ultimately, it was not barefoot gorillas who conquered South Vietnam. It was the North Vietnamese conventional military." And so, the threat can evolve over time. In 1963, David Halberstam was writing about the insurgency in South Vietnam, after Tet, in particular. And in a sense, the counter...I mean, I personally am a little skeptical of this argument. The argument people like he made, and others, like Bob Sorley, is that the war was won in South Vietnam. But the North Vietnamese adapted. And, with Soviet and Chinese support, were able to defeat South Vietnam conventionally, in the context of eroding American public opinion.

And to me, that just, again, it's, I'm a little bit of a hammer and a nail on this, but it really goes to the point that decisive, overwhelming, conventional military force and the ability to directly impose your will, that's very apropos in Taiwan. It's apropos in the case of Ukraine. That's what really, really matters. You can't fail to get that right. And of course, easier said than done.

Mary: Yeah, easier said than done. And it wasn't just declining American public support, Bridge. I mean, Congress pulled the money over those two years. So, you know, if you're like the Afghan soldier that, you know, suddenly doesn't have air support, and you depend on air support, are you really gonna, you know, sacrifice and die? Secretary Pompeo, I heard you there in the background as Bridge was talking, and going back to your comments on leadership, and as Bridge says, decisive action, I have not yet heard the president articulate what our goal is in our efforts to support Ukraine. It feels like we want Putin to lose, but we're not sure that we want Ukraine to win. And the same goes with China. There hasn't been a statement, really, to the nation, at all, after the spy balloon. What do we want our relationship to be? What's the goal? Are they an enemy? Are they not? What's your reaction?

Secretary Pompeo: Well, Mary, I think those are true. I try not to be political here. I have been disappointed that President Biden...maybe he'll do it tonight in the State of the Union. He will lay out clearly for the American people, "Here's what this looks like. Here's what this is likely to cost, and here's the objectives, on the ground, both the

tactical and strategic." But the, "Here's why this matters to the United States of America, and to someone sitting in Texas or somebody sitting in Wisconsin." Make the case. Or, if you're not gonna make the case, you will end up, as Bridge just described, you will end up having a feeling that this is the right thing, but only the capacity to do incremental change. And that seldom leads to the decisive outcomes that I think, if President Biden were to lay down what really mattered, he would lay out. You know, the challenge with China is a more complicated one, a deeper one.

We began to do this. It started with the work that Nadia did, with the strategy that we laid out at the beginning of the Trump administration, first time talking about China in a fundamentally different way than we talked about China in three or four decades. And then, over time, senior leaders, culminating with me, I'm here at the Nixon Library tonight, giving [inaudible 00:43:57] remarks here at the Nixon Library, that laid down, as best we could for the American people, why this mattered, what the risks were, the dimensions of the conflict, and the things that we would have to do to go make sure that we got America back to the place that it needed to be. These are hard things. They're complicated. It's hard to stare in the face of evil and tell the American people, "You've got work in front of you, and this won't be free or painless." But this is what leaders do.

Last thought here. I can't tell you how many times I had conversations with my European counterparts. When you meet with a European foreign minister, in almost every case, they're an elected official, unlike the Secretary of State, who was a has-been political elected official, they're still in office. They actually have constituencies. They are representing some part of their country, some party from their country. And I would tell them, "You have to go make the case so that..." They would say, "Mike, we can't spend any more money. Our people prefer more money for NHS and not for defense, or more money for the German medical system than for new Leopard tanks." And I would remind them that the American people would prefer that too, but that their task was to go do that.

And I would then offer to them, it was a little bit tongue-in-cheek, but I was willing to do it, "Happy to go to your home district, and we can stand on a podium together and make this case." So, it's not just American leaders that have to get this right as well. I wish President Ghani had been able to rally the people in Afghanistan in important ways. He never had a coalition. We ended up having to bring the Taliban to the meetings because he couldn't get them there. Nor could he bring the disparate elements of Afghan political power to bear either. And so this requires political leadership, not only from the United States of America, for the resources we're going to provide, but American leaders that can convince political leaders that are part of this challenge to do the right thing for their constituents too.

Mary: Nadia Schadlow, can this be done without American leadership? Is there a lesson from Vietnam? Because once we started to pull aid, it fell apart. And once we left Afghanistan, it fell apart. And now we're shouldering much of the burden in the Ukraine conflict. Thoughts?

Nadia: Well, American leadership is clearly necessary, but the formula for it, in a way, it is different, right? It can't be done just with American leadership. That's how I'd put it. You know, to Secretary Pompeo's point, right, you need to have these other countries, our allies and our partners, you know, taking the lead as well, doing their part. And I think that that was a big message of the previous administration, and a correct message, one that we're seeing... I think, you know, to be fair, I think the Biden administration too has made it clear that they want to see the Germans out there as well, and the Poles out there as well. The Poles clearly have been out there as well. So, it can't be done just with American leadership alone. That's how I'd put it.

You know, and I think the same as in Asia. Bridge and Matt and Alex can speak to Asia as well. We're seeing how important it is that Japan is really taking the lead, and becoming much more active in the Indo-Pacific. And the landscape would look quite different today without that. So, it can't be done just with American leadership. We are an important, perhaps a dominant component, but not enough, for many reasons. I don't think the American public wants that. They want to see our allies and partners doing their part.

Mary: It's a great point. Ambassador O'Brien, I just, again, wanna roll it back to Vietnam, and this Vietnam syndrome that has been talked about throughout this seminar. You know, the American people haven't seen an overwhelming victory since, arguably, World War II. I guess the first Iraq war, which was, you know, very much smaller in scale and size, and in commitment of troops. Is there that capacity today, as president...I almost said President Pompeo, sorry, as Secretary Pompeo said, to really rally the American public, and this very risk-averse Pentagon, into doing things, like escalating to achieve peace, as Bridge put it at the beginning? Oh, I think we're on mute, Ambassador O'Brien.

Ambassador O'Brien: Okay. No, look, great question, Mary. I think it can be done. The question is, when is it right to rally the American people for an unconditional win? What is that conflict? You know, I'm not sure it's Ukraine. I think it would be in Taiwan. One thing I will point out, if you want to get the history of what happened in Afghanistan, a lot of the good history, there's a new book out called "Never Give an Inch," written by our friend Mike Pompeo. He's gonna be hawking some books, I think, after this seminar, in the Nixon Library, but... "New York Times" bestseller. Even the journalists that don't like Mike have come out and had to give him credit for writing a heck of a book, so take a look at it.

And it will give you a real feel for what it's like to be in the trenches on these issues, and that they're hard issues. But when we find the right conflict, and look, I think the conflict that we're facing right now against China, it's a, you know, we can call it a competition, but look, the reality is this a struggle for our way of life, where we have to make a decision. Do we want freedom? Do we want individual liberty? Do we want free speech? Do we want freedom of religion? Do we want to be able to keep and bear arms in our country? Those things, it's not just about the people of China having those rights. It'd be bad enough if that was just the case, and the Chinese were oppressing their people, which they've been doing, oppressing the Tibetans, oppressing the Uyghurs, oppressing the folks in Hong Kong, threatening the folks in Taiwan, but they wanna expand it and have dominion over all of us.

And, you know, we see with this humiliation of the balloon flight this past week, which is more of a symbol than anything. But if there's a silver lining there, maybe the American people, maybe we're not gonna get the leadership we need from our elected officials to tell us what's at stake in this conflict, because, Mike knows it, I know it, you know it. And I think everyone on this line who served knows what we're up against. And it's a massive challenge. But maybe the American people have woken up, and they're gonna start to realize that there are a hundred million of these balloons in our homes, through TikTok. You know, your phone, if it's got TikTok on it, is listening to everything you say. The Chinese have your passwords. They have your data. They have your personal data.

Every university where we're doing cutting-edge, great research for the American people and for our students, and the reason students flock to America from all over the world, it's all being stolen. And there are Confucius Institutes at almost every major university in America. There's farmland around our military bases, our key bases in Grand Forks, North Dakota, Lackland in Texas. And the Chinese have bought thousands of acres around and surrounded our military bases with farmland, with their own workers, with Chinese nationals, coming to work on those bases. I mean, so, these are just a few things. There's a list of 20 or 30 things, Nadia and Bridge, and Kim, and the whole team can walk through 'em. Mike and I could give you 200, but we, you know, it'd be classified.

We've gotta decide, is it time for us to stand up for our way of life? Do we wanna acknowledge this challenge? And are we gonna have a leader who's gonna rally us to those challenges? And maybe we don't have a leader today who will, but I think the American people, when they understand what's at stake, are gonna demand that type of a leader. And that's why we have elections. Alex talked about this, and I think the next election is gonna have to be about, do we wanna keep our way of life? And if it's too hard to fight for our way of life, it's too hard to get rid of the Confucius Institutes, it's too

hard to ban TikTok, too hard to tell Wall Street that they can't, you know, finance the building of the PLA Navy, then we can just give up.

But I think we're gonna get a leader that's gonna stand up for the United States, and hopefully many leaders in Congress, and talk about this threat to our way of life. And maybe the humiliation of this balloon flight is gonna be a wakeup call for the American people, not just on the balloon in our airspace, and the sorry state of our military, but all the other things that we face in this... It's not just a conventional war. It's a war of ideas. It's a war of technology. It's a war of finance. And we've gotta be, you know, on the ball on all those fronts, and if we do, look, we'll prevail, and there'll be another generation that has freedom in America.

Mary: You know, Matt Pottinger, Ambassador O'Brien just laid out what's at stake in very simple, stark, but compelling terms. President Nixon said, "If we do not exercise power for the good, then there are plenty of men who would gladly exercise it for evil." Is that the kind of a choice, as Ambassador O'Brien, and as President Nixon said, that we face today? Do you agree?

Matt: Yeah. Look, I think we're gonna win, because Americans, whenever I engage with regular Americans and explain a lot of things that we're talking about tonight, people get it. They get it intuitively. They're willing to stand up and fight for the things, you know, our way of life, as Robert put it. The discouraging part is that that small but influential group of people, who are very influential, they are influential in our universities, they're influential in our culture, you know, in our films and in segments of business, they're the frustrating ones because they don't really want to...they don't wanna face this competition. But most Americans do. When they know what's at stake, they want to preserve our way of life, and that's what gives me courage and optimism that [inaudible 00:54:19].

Mary: Matt, let me stop you right there, saying "courage and optimism." I know we so rarely have high notes. And we've only got just a couple minutes left, and I wanted to fit in Alex Wong before I go to the co-chairs and we wrap. Alex.

Alex: Just quickly. You know, Secretary Pompeo highlights, you know, tonight is the State of the Union. And, you know, with this surveillance balloon incident, it is an opportunity for Biden to put out a strong message to, as Robert said, rally the United States in this competition, in this conflict, or this new Cold War, whatever phrase you wanna use, with China. And it is teed up for him, because the American people are listening, but not just the American people. Xi Jinping is gonna gauge his response, and our allies and our partners around the world, as they're looking at this competition, they're looking to his response. And I do think he should use terms like "win," like "triumph," of America, at the end, winning this competition. But if he uses that language,

if he tries to rally, and he sends a strong message, he also has to back it up with substance.

And he should challenge Congress, challenge the American people, truly, to put substance, resources behind the competition, in terms of defense spending, really upping our defense spending, and focusing it on the Indo-Pacific, on some of the things that Robert mentioned, tough regulations on investment and on technology transfer, that really view this competition as existential, and, you know, a positive and strong trade agenda that turns it and casts it in a competitive valence. These are all policies that, in the State of the Union, at this moment, when the world and the American people listening, Biden can lay down those challenges and see how people respond. It's an opportunity, and I hope he doesn't fumble it.

Mary: Thank you, Alex. Closing comments over to the co-chairs, Ambassador O'Brien, to you for closing thoughts.

Ambassador O'Brien: Mary, I'm optimistic about the future of this country and about the fact that we're gonna stay the shining city on the hill that Ronald Reagan talked about. One of the things that gives me that optimism is, as Matt said, talking to the American people, talking to young people who serve in the military. I've had a chance to spend a lot of time with them lately, and, you know, these young officers and young NCOs and enlisted folks, and they're just great Americans. They give you hope. But I'm also optimistic because of the folks who are on this panel. I mean, I look at Nadia and Alex and Matt and you and Kim, and [inaudible 00:56:52] couple things in common. One, they're all a lot younger than I am, and you all are.

But there's also [inaudible 00:56:58] Bridge. There's a lot of firepower. Intellectual firepower, moral firepower, and courage with the folks who are on tonight with the broader panel. And I think we're gonna see everybody who's on this call tonight, maybe not me, but the rest of the crew is gonna be back in government, and is gonna be fighting for these American values that are so dear to us, and that made our country so great. So, look, we've got a huge challenge ahead of us. We've got, you know, somewhat wanting leadership right now, when it comes to those challenges. But at the same time, I feel good about the future of the country. And again, I'm, you know, proud to watch all the folks on this call who've already contributed much and who have much to contribute in the future. And that gives me a lot of hope.

Mary: Thank you, Ambassador O'Brien. Secretary Pompeo, at the Nixon Library, over to you for any closing thoughts.

Secretary Pompeo: Oh, I think it's been a great discussion, Robert. Not only do you know lots of those military folks, you have family members, your kids serving. Bless you, bless them, and everybody on this seminar tonight. If you have family, hug them, tell 'em

that we all love them. We are counting on them and that American leadership will get this right. The American people will push our country in the right direction. If our leaders are candid and honest, they will listen. They will take to heart the things that America needs to do, both abroad and at home. And I'm convinced we're gonna get it right too.

Mary: Well, thank you again, not just to our co-chairs and the seminar members, the Nixon Foundation team, but to all of you out there watching and listening. Please follow us across social media. You'll see us on your TV, hear us on your radio and your podcasts. That's it for this month's seminar of the Nixon Foundation. I'm Mary Kissel. Good night.