

The Vietnamization Process In Retrospect

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The Vietnamization Process In Retrospect

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Thesis: Three major shortcomings in US policy led to the failure of Vietnamization. The US negotiated a flawed "peace" which allowed the NVA to retain forces in South Vietnam. The US Congress then failed to provide the money necessary to fund the programs agreed upon under Vietnamization. Finally, the US failed to honor President Nixon's pledge to re-intervene in the conflict should the North Vietnamese flagrantly violated the peace agreement. Had the US addressed these issues, South Vietnam might be a free country today.

Discussion: The Vietnamization process was the final failure of US policy in Vietnam. Becoming official policy in the summer of 1969, the roots of its failure were planted long before. President Kennedy surrendered the initiative for the length of the conflict by failing to enforce the neutrality of Laos and, to a lesser extent, that of Cambodia. This failure allowed the North Vietnamese to establish sanctuaries in these countries and to construct the Ho Chi Minh trail. Supplied via the trail, the NVA used its sanctuaries to launch the attacks that eventually overwhelmed South Vietnam. The US also erred in forcing democracy on South Vietnam. It proved disruptive for a new nation with no democratic tradition that was engaged in a civil war. The US' authorization of a coup against South Vietnamese President Diem was also a mistake. It added to the political instability within South Vietnam and this instability made it difficult to cultivate military leadership. Once the US committed combat troops in Vietnam, it Americanized the war and adopted a "Search and Destroy" strategy. These actions retarded the development of the RVNAF, isolated it from its people and made it vulnerable to enemy propaganda. Once Vietnamization was made policy, US troop withdrawals were linked to political concerns and not the military situation. The US ended the Vietnamization process by negotiating the Paris Peace Agreement that allowed the NVA to retain its forces in South Vietnam. These negotiations were conducted without South Vietnamese knowledge or approval. The South Vietnamese agreed to sign the Peace Agreement under US threats to abandon them if they didn't. After the Peace Agreement was signed, the US provided only one third of the funding required to support the military programs designed to make the RVNAF self-sufficient. While the RVNAF initially fought well after the US withdrawal, their strength waned as US military support dwindled. Nixon was unable to honor his promise to re-intervene to punish North Vietnamese treaty violations because he was embroiled in the Watergate scandal. Congress also cutoff funding for US military operations in Vietnam. President Thieu added to the problem by over-extending the RVNAF in trying to hold every inch of South Vietnamese territory.

Conclusion: Vietnamization proved to be a politically expedient method of withdrawing from an unpopular war. All of the problems cited degraded Vietnamization's chances of success. Vietnamization's mortal wounds came from the US failure to insist on an NVA withdrawal for a peace agreement, the failure of the US to provide adequate funding to the RVNAF, and the failure of the US to re-intervene as promised.

"We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly, scheduled timetable. This withdraw will be made from a position of strength and not weakness."

President Nixon announcing Vietnamization to the American people in a 3 November 1969 radio address.

Source: Speech File Service, U.S. Army Command Information Unit, Washington DC, 1969.

Introduction.

The American experience in Vietnam continues to influence many aspects of its society. The United States (US) involvement in Vietnam has left its public more suspicious, its administrations more wary of foreign intervention and its military more involved in political affairs. Americans are determined 'that there will never again be another Vietnam.' How had America failed so miserably and at such great cost?

The US began its journey in Vietnam with the highest of intentions - to build a free and democratic South Vietnam. It would be forced to withdraw after fighting its longest war, with its objectives very much in doubt, under a process known as Vietnamization. Designed to make the South Vietnamese a self-sufficient democracy capable of defending itself, Vietnamization proved to be the final failure of US policy in Vietnam. Why had it failed?

This paper will explore the military aspects of the Vietnamization process. While the Vietnamization effort also involved political and economic reforms, they will only be mentioned in terms of their affect on the military portion of Vietnamization. The author will analyze whether Vietnamization was sound policy with a chance of succeeding, or whether it was a politically

expedient strategy for the US to withdraw from an unpopular war.

Specifically, the author will analyze whether South Vietnam would be a free nation today had the US lived up to its promises under Vietnamization.

Events before, during and after Vietnamization was implemented as policy degraded its odds of succeeding. While all these factors played a role in the demise of Vietnamization and each will be addressed, the author has identified three as having mortally wounded Vietnamization. The first was the US signing on to the Paris Peace Agreement, which allowed the North Vietnamese to maintain forces in South Vietnam. Second was the failure of the US to adequately fund the military programs agreed upon under Vietnamization. Finally, the failure of the US to honor President Nixon's pledge to re-intervene if the North Vietnamese flagrantly violated the Peace Agreement ensured the death of South Vietnam and therefore Vietnamization.

An understanding of the events foreshadowing the US entanglement in Vietnam is crucial to comprehending how and why Vietnamization came to be policy. Accordingly, this paper will begin by exploring the strategic setting that led to the US involvement in Vietnam. It will then cover the commitment of US combat forces, their eventual withdrawal and the Vietnamization of the war. It will briefly cover the Republic of Vietnam's Armed Forces (RVNAF) performance during the Tet offensive, the Cambodian and Laotian incursions and the Easter Offensive. The paper will then cover the Paris Peace Agreement and final collapse of South Vietnam. The paper will conclude with the author's analysis of Vietnamization.

It is not the author's intent to provide a highly detailed account of equipment and training programs or of battles. This essay will focus on the strategic level in its examination of the Vietnamization process to explore the concepts behind its implementation.

Strategic Setting.

Cold War tensions were high when John F. Kennedy was sworn in as the 35th President of the United States in January 1961. The previous fifteen years

had seen numerous confrontations between the free world, led by the US, and the forces of communism. There had been the communist civil war victory in China, rise of Castro in Cuba and the takeover of Hungary and Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. There had also been active combat in the Korean War between communist and forces of the United Nations. As stated in National Security Council Policy Paper Number 68, the US viewed communism as a monolithic movement bent on taking over the world. The "Domino Theory", which held that a communist victory in any country would lead to subsequent communist coups throughout the region, was accepted as fact. President Kennedy was an idealist and he had strong feelings about the role of America as a beacon of freedom and democracy. He saw the US as having a moral obligation to assist all other nations in resisting communism and was determined not to shirk this duty while he was in office. President Kennedy's commitment was evident in his inaugural address when he proclaimed:

Let every nation know, whether it wishes well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foes, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty. This much we pledge - and more.¹

One burden President Kennedy inherited was the situation in Vietnam. Formerly a part of French Indochina with Laos and Cambodia, Vietnam's communist forces had expelled the French in a conflict known as the First Indochina War that culminated with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. In a peace agreement concluded in Geneva in 1954, Vietnam had been divided into two territories. The communists under Ho Chi Minh controlled North Vietnam while South Vietnam was run by a staunch anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem with French support. The separation of Vietnams was supposed to be temporary as the Geneva agreement called for elections within two years. Fearing a communist ballot box victory, the US supported Diem in his refusal to hold the required elections. Diem quickly found himself involved in a guerrilla war, as

¹ Stephen E. Ambrose, The Rise to Globalism (New York: Penguin Group, 1997) 77.

Vietnamese Communists (VC), supported by North Vietnam, launched attacks against his government in the South.

The US immediately supplanted a weary France in Vietnam. The US had supported the French war effort in Vietnam in terms of money and equipment but had always tried to deter France colonialism there. With France out of the picture, the US now provided direct support to the government of South Vietnam in the form of military and economic assistance. US direct involvement with the Government of South Vietnam began under the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM), a program to assist the South Vietnamese in utilizing the US equipment left by the French. From TERM, the US commitment evolved to providing military advisors down to the battalion level. By the time President Kennedy took office, the US had provided over \$1 billion in aid to South Vietnam and had 692 American military advisors in country².

The US inherited a French trained 200,000 man Vietnamese National Armed Force (VNAF) primarily comprised of former National Guard and French Union troops.³ The French stood up the VNAF in May 1950 with 30,000 regulars and a like number of auxiliaries.⁴ Vietnamese Military Schools were also established in 1950, albeit with French instructors, and the first groups of Vietnamese officers received training. A Ministry of National Defense was established to coordinate all aspects of national security. Two years later, a Joint General Staff was created to facilitate the implementation of national military strategy. South Vietnam was also divided into four Military Regions (MR) or Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ) to enhance planning and command and control. In its early years VNAF grew quickly as the French tried a Vietnamization process of their own, termed "Yellowizing", when combat losses made it necessary.

Still, when the US took over in 1955 the VNAF was arranged in brigade sized units and was poorly trained and armed. Desertions were high, morale

² Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994) 639.

³ Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, personal interview, 8 Jan 00.

⁴ General Cao Van Vien, Leadership (Washington, D.C. Center of Military History) 10.

was low and the VNAF's combat power was limited. The US Military Assistance Advisors Group (MAAG) soon scaled the VNAF back to 150,000 men and began to implement training and leadership reforms.⁵ While the US could direct this type of draw-down because it was paying the bills, the discharge of these troops caused turmoil within the ranks of the VNAF. A prominent Vietnamese historian commented on the mass discharge:

The general consensus was that the mass discharge of 1955 was an act both psychologically destructive and detrimental to the combat potential of the armed forces. At least 6,000 experienced NCOs who made up the combat elite of the army and the nuclei of several units had been released from service. The results are evident. When the Viet Minh resumed their war in 1960, several of our combat units suffered from ineffectiveness because, instead of dedicated and combat-experienced NCOs, they had been replaced by green draftees..the government tried to make amends by later reinstating the these NCOs but only a few were willing to come back.⁶

With its new size of 150,000, the VNAF land forces were organized into four field divisions, 6 light divisions, 1 airborne brigade, 4 armored cavalry regiments, 13 territorial regiments and 11 artillery battalions (there were also small air force and naval contingents). Although President Diem would later re-designate the VNAF as the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF), its structure would remain basically the same, except for the additions of 86 Ranger Companies, for the length of his tenure.⁷ Diem used the RVNAF to eliminate threats to his regime, including the VC and various religious militias with South Vietnam which challenged his authority. There were also threats from within the RVNAF itself. Military officers staged a failed coup in 1960 and ordered the bombing of the Presidential Palace in 1962. Still, the RVNAF was initially successful in quelling the opposition and was a unifying factor in the country.

President Kennedy was no stranger to the situation in Southeast Asia when he took office. As a Senator, Kennedy closely observed the proceedings in Vietnam and subscribed to President Eisenhower's belief that it was the linchpin to security in the region. Senator Kennedy called Vietnam the

⁵ George C. Herring, America's Longest War (New York: McGraw Hill, 1986) 63.

⁶ Vien, Leadership, 25.

"keystone of the arch" for security in Southeast Asia and South Vietnam "a proving ground for democracy in Asia"⁸.

While President Kennedy agreed with the Vietnam policy of his predecessor, he differed greatly in his military strategy. Kennedy saw Eisenhower as being too cautious in confronting communism and found his "New Look" military strategy unbalanced. Eisenhower had slashed conventional military forces to reduce costs and the New Look relied almost exclusively on the deterrence provided by nuclear weapons. It was an asymmetrical concept which it was not structured to fight directly against communist "Wars of Liberation". Instead, the New Look sought to deter (by threat of nuclear annihilation) the support of such wars by the Soviet Union and China. Kennedy saw the need for greater flexibility within the military and he wanted options between doing nothing and engaging in nuclear warfare. He developed a strategy of "Flexible Response", a symmetrical concept that built up both the nation's conventional forces and its nuclear arsenal. The Flexible Response also focused on developing a counterinsurgency capability. President Kennedy expanded the Army's Green Berets and other Special Forces to train friendly nations' militaries to resist communist insurgencies. Inherent within this strategy was the objective of escalating just to the point required for victory. The Flexible Response military was designed to provide the US the ability to confront communism without risking nuclear war with the Soviet Union or China.

President Kennedy moved quickly on Vietnam. In May of 1961, under adherence to the Domino Theory, the National Security Council (NSC) established the prevention of a communist government in South Vietnam as an American national objective. The strategy was to "create in that country a viable and increasingly democratic society through military, political, economic and covert actions".⁹ Kennedy wanted to show the communists that he was serious about confronting their expansion after the failure on the Bay of

⁷ Vien, Leadership, 31.

⁸ Kissinger, 639.

⁹ Kissinger, 650.

Pigs invasion. In June 1961 he said "We have a problem in trying to make our power credible, Vietnam looks like the place".¹⁰

In its battle against communism, the Kennedy Administration expanded the US 'nation building' in Vietnam. While nation building had begun under President Eisenhower, Kennedy greatly expanded the scope of the US effort. The role of the US military was to provide advisors and training in order to build the RVNAF into a force capable of suppressing the communist insurgency. The US advisors began to train the Vietnamese in the American way of war. While there were the Green Berets and Navy SEALs to train counter-insurgency training, the US naturally began to train and model the RVNAF as a model of itself. Despite the fact that it was involved in a guerilla conflict at the time, the RVNAF subsequently concentrated its combat power in heavy conventional forces. The American advisors were a mixed lot in the initial stage. The main threat to the US at the time was from the Soviet Union in Europe and service in Vietnam was not a career enhancing tour. Even when things in Vietnam heated up making it 'the place to be', the advisory effort was plagued by high turnover rates. Advisors were normally younger, of lower rank and had less combat experience than their Vietnamese counterparts. Because of these factors, many advisors ended up as facilitators coordinating US support rather than as trainers.¹¹ While Kennedy declined to intervene directly, he did increase the number of military advisors nearly ten-fold in his first year and dramatically stepped the delivery of military equipment.¹² In keeping with the principles of the Flexible Response's ladder of gradual escalation, President Kennedy hoped the US role could remain at providing advisors and equipment in Vietnam.

While talking tough and sending advisors and equipment to South Vietnam, President Kennedy made a decision that surrendered the military initiative to the VC and North Vietnamese for the length of the conflict. He refused to

¹⁰ Kissinger, 645.

¹¹ Dr. Lewis Sorley, personal interview, 6 Jan 00.

¹² Ambrose, 196.

intervene to ensure the neutrality of Laos which had been guaranteed under the Geneva Agreement. While officially recognizing Laos' neutrality, the North Vietnamese established an infiltration route through Laos that became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Running practically the length of South Vietnam, the trail allowed North Vietnam to move men and supplies unmolested and at will. Eisenhower warned Kennedy that Laos was the key to success in Vietnam and all Southeast Asia and had been willing to intervene there regardless of world opinion.¹³ Kennedy also understood the importance of Laos and he spoke about it publicly, yet he never acted to expel the North Vietnamese there after they began constructing the Ho Chi Minh trail. In later years the Johnson Administration and, to a lesser extent, the Nixon Administration, would also fail to take action to enforce the neutrality of Laos and Cambodia. This failure would later affect the chances of Vietnamization succeeding.

Despite the risks, the Kennedy Administration began its journey confident of success in Vietnam. President Kennedy genuinely believed in the superiority of democracy and the righteousness of the cause. Kennedy's chief speech writer Theodore Sorrensen summed up the general feeling that "(America) could supply better training, support and direction, better communications, transportation and logistics" to halt communism.¹⁴ President Kennedy saw no need for committing American fighting forces in the conflict stating "South Vietnam will provide the necessary men".¹⁵ In attempting to build the RVNAF to the point of self-sufficiency without US intervention, Kennedy's initial objectives would be the same as those of Vietnamization years later.

Under the influx of advisors, equipment and money, there were initial improvements in the security of South Vietnam. The early consensus was that the RVNAF were defeating the VC and that the South Vietnamese government was

¹³ Kissinger, 64.

¹⁴ Ambrose, 194.

¹⁵ Ambrose, 194.

stabilizing. It appeared the superiority of the democracy and American advice and equipment would win the day in South Vietnam.

In addition to pushing for vast military growth, the US also insisted on the implementation of democracy in South Vietnam. A difficult thing to accomplish in any country without a democratic tradition, it was doubly difficult to introduce into a new country engaged in a heated civil war. In the fragmented society of South Vietnam, the introduction of political parties affected the military. Diem struggled unsuccessfully to allow some form of opposition that would not threaten his power base and the country. The French legacy also adversely affected South Vietnam's political development. The French had sub-divided South Vietnam into autonomous provinces and had crushed any leader showing signs of nationalism or initiative. One Vietnamese historian commented about the leadership problems of the 1960s by "By wrecking generation after generation of political leaders through repression, they (the French) contributed significantly to Vietnam's present political problems."¹⁶ In the end, unsure of loyalties and agendas of many of his officers, Diem would promote only those who were members of his Personalist Labor Party. There were several noted cases where military subordinates overruled or infringed upon the orders of superiors because, although junior in military rank, they held high positions within Diem's party.¹⁷

By 1963 it was obvious that things had deteriorated in South Vietnam. The VC, with support beginning to flow down the Ho Chi Minh trail, stepped up attacks and assassinations on South Vietnamese officials. President Diem was not winning the hearts and minds of his people with his brand of "democracy". He did not care for the pluralism democracy required, and he ruthlessly crushed all dissenters including influential Buddhists sects. Following the recommendations of some American advisors, Diem had also initiated a strategic hamlet program which forced farmers to consolidate into government controlled encampments. While this policy may have met its goal of denying the VC access

¹⁶ Vien, Leadership, 5.

to the population and food, it was extremely unpopular with farmers who were removed from fields their families had cultivated for centuries. It also left the VC in control of the countryside and spoke poorly of the government's ability to maintain security. While the VC were running the countryside, many Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units were employed in suppressing the growing discontent within the country. Diem became unpopular with his people as well as with Kennedy. Kennedy saw his Vietnam policy being held back by Diem's failure to properly implement democracy. To stimulate progress in the nation building effort, President Kennedy authorized a coup that left Diem dead.

The death of Diem did not improve the situation in South Vietnam. Subsequent military regimes and leaders showed no more concern than for democracy than Diem, nor were they better in suppressing the communist insurgency. Some officers who had taken part in the coup were rewarded with double or triple promotions and one member of the junta returned to his former unit dispensing rank insignia as freely as souvenirs.¹⁸ Officers vying for power broke into cliques that remained suspicious and uncooperative with each other well after the coup. These officers, in positions of military authority solely on the basis of political loyalties, would later hamper the development of the RVNAF and the Vietnamization process. How President Kennedy would have handled the deteriorating situation after Diem's demise will never be known because he too was assassinated less than a month later.

President Johnson took office in November 1963 pledging to continue the US policy in Vietnam. Shortly after he assumed his duties, President Johnson assured South Vietnam that "We shall maintain in Vietnam the American personnel and material as needed to assist you in achieving victory".¹⁹ Johnson showed his resolve by quickly increasing the number of American

¹⁷ Vien, Leadership, 10.

¹⁸ Vien, Leadership, 62.

¹⁹ Ambrose, 198.

military advisors to South Vietnam by thirty percent.²⁰ Like Kennedy, he also sought to keep from involving Americans in direct combat. In 1964 President Johnson promised "we are not going to send American boys...to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves".²¹

While President Johnson tried to continue on with his predecessor's strategy, he inherited a more dangerous Vietnam than President Kennedy had started with. The coup against Diem emboldened North Vietnam. Believing it could take advantage of the turmoil and disgusted by the United States' refusal to negotiate, Hanoi sent North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars down the Ho Chi Minh trail for the first time.²² Despite optimistic reports generated from Saigon and subsequently passed to the American people via the Johnson Administration, the South Vietnamese Government was losing control in 1964.

America Stumbles In.

1964 was an election year in the United States, and President Johnson faced a hawkish challenger in Republican Senator Barry Goldwater. Goldwater charged that Johnson was too soft on communism and championed massive US bombing in North Vietnam. Johnson played himself as a moderate against Goldwater's extremism, arguing that he was taking a stand in Vietnam without deploying Americans in combat. An incident in the Tonkin Gulf in August 1964 provided Johnson the opportunity to show he was tough on communism. While the facts are now in dispute, it was reported that North Vietnamese patrol boats had fired on a US destroyer. President Johnson charged the North Vietnamese with aggression and pushed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution through Congress. The resolution sailed through both houses, authorizing the President to "take all necessary measures...to repel armed attack" against American forces and gave the President the power to "prevent further aggression...and to take all necessary

²⁰ Ambrose, 198.

²¹ Ambrose, 199.

²² Kissinger, 656.

steps in the defense of freedom".²³ President Johnson now had authority to take any action he deemed necessary in Vietnam.

Johnson made a calculated political decision in pursuing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution instead of requesting a declaration of war. He wanted to focus his campaign agenda on domestic issues to support his goal of a "Great Society". A declaration of war would have required him to devote all energy and resources to victory if it passed and would have been politically humiliating if it were defeated in congress. Remembering Korea, Johnson also feared a declaration of war might inflame the Soviets and Chinese. Ultimately, however, President Johnson did not want American actions in Vietnam to overshadowing his true focus on the home front. His political posturing served him well and he easily won the election. His decision not to rally the support of the American public over Vietnam, however, would cause a permanent rift between the US government and the its people for the duration of the conflict. The lack of public support and involvement would later prove fatal to the Vietnamization effort.

Even with the latitude the Tonkin Gulf Resolution provided him, President Johnson did not immediately take decisive military action in Vietnam. Still hoping to restore order, the US continued to pour aid into South Vietnam as the government in Saigon faltered. In early 1965 the situation had reached a point where the US would have to intervene militarily or South Vietnam would fall. Johnson was still hesitating in February 1965 when the VC attacked a US airbase in South Vietnam killing Americans and damaging helicopters. Johnson approved the order for an immediate retaliatory air strike on North Vietnam.

A single air strike, of course, could not turn the tide in favor of the South Vietnamese. More had to be done to bolster the regime in Saigon and elements in the JCS pressed to deploy troops. Johnson favored an Air Force campaign of bombing North Vietnam instead. According to Secretary of Defense McNamara, the bombing would raise the morale of the South Vietnamese, reduce

²³ Ambrose, 200.

the flow of men and equipment down the Ho Chi Minh trail, and lower morale in North Vietnam.²⁴ The Johnson Administration believed that a couple of months of bombing would compel the North Vietnamese to come to the bargaining table on American terms.

A bombing campaign was an easy answer to the problem. American ground troops would not be put at risk, casualties would be kept low and the Soviets and Chinese should not be drawn in. A bombing campaign also fit into the limited war concept of the Flexible Response strategy. It was a gradual escalation of pressure designed to achieve a favorable negotiating position, not an attempt to destroy the enemy. Johnson exercised great restraint in the bombing campaign and became personally involved in selecting targets. Despite several months of bombing North Vietnam and VC sites in South Vietnam, the military balance of power continued to favor the NVA and VC on the ground. Men and supplies kept flowing down the Ho Chi Minh trail and the situation in the South worsened. The next step on the escalation ladder was the introduction of ground troops. American troops initially assigned missions guarding US airbases were now ordered to seek out and engage the enemy. The Second Indochina War had begun.

To the Johnson Administration, the use of ground troops was just an extension of its current policy. Shortly after authorizing ground troops, President Johnson directed that the action should be taken in a way to "minimize the any appearance of sudden changes in policy...These movements and changes should be understood as being gradual and wholly consistent with existing policy".²⁵ The overall objective remained to force the North Vietnamese to recognize South Vietnam, not to defeat or conquer North Vietnam.

General William Westmoreland was the man in charge of the US ground forces in Vietnam. While he had the confidence of the President, General Westmoreland did not subscribe to the counterinsurgency techniques of the

²⁴ Ambrose, 202.

Flexible Response strategy. Westmoreland was an old fashioned warrior who sought decisive battle with the enemy. The VC and North Vietnamese, however, chose not to engage in conventional battle. As the home team in a guerrilla war they had the initiative and they struck at the time and place of their choosing. When Westmoreland was successful in drawing the enemy into pitched battle, such as in the Ia Drang Valley in the fall of 1965, the US Forces won substantial tactical victories over NVA regulars. Unfortunately, Westmoreland was unable to exploit his tactical advantage by pursuing the defeated enemy into sanctuaries in neutral Laos and Cambodia. Frustrated by the restrictions of a limited war, Westmoreland directed a military strategy of "Search and Destroy". With the stated objective of killing VC and NVA at a rate faster than they could infiltrate, the Search and Destroy strategy was one of simple attrition. It left the communists in control of large portions of the countryside and won few hearts and minds among the South Vietnamese populace. With battlefield success so elusive, the US "victories" were measured in terms of sorties flown, tonnage dropped, weapons seized and enemy body counts. Secretary of Defense McNamara's Planning, Programming Budgeting System tried to measure the amount of resources (human and material) the US would have to expend to bring the enemy to his breaking point - that point where he could not or would go on. The US used statistics to assert it was winning the war as 1968 began. On the basis of enemy losses compared to infiltration rates, General Westmoreland projected victory in the near future.

Westmoreland ignored the development of the RVNAF and it was forced to function with obsolete weapons and equipment during his tenure. The failure to properly cultivate the RVNAF from the beginning of the US involvement would later harm the implementation of Vietnamization.

Tet

The enemy's Tet Offensive of 1968 marked a major turning point in the war. Violating the annual self-proclaimed Tet holiday cease-fire, the NVA and VC

²⁵ Kissinger, 643.

launched a coordinated and concerted attack on 36 of 44 provincial capitals and on 5 of 6 cities in South Vietnam on 30 January 1968.²⁶ While initially surprised by the attack, the US and ARVN quickly rallied and inflicted tremendous battlefield defeats on the enemy. When the fighting was over the enemy had lost more than 20% of his forces in South Vietnam including 33,000 killed in action.²⁷ The VC and its infrastructure were particularly hard hit with whole units being wiped out. From the summer of 1968 on, 80% of the VC ranks would have to be filled by NVA regulars because of losses during the Tet offensive.²⁸

There were other outcomes of the Tet offensive. For the first time the South Vietnamese urban population had been exposed to the real hazards of war.²⁹ The brutality of the VC and NVA against the civilian population during Tet, particularly in Hue, ensured the populace would resist future 'liberation' by the communists. The Government of South Vietnam had the support to implement an expanded mobilization program after Tet. The General Mobilization Law of 1968 expanded the draft to men 19-38 years of age, up from 21-28 years.³⁰ The increased mobilization would eventually allow the RVNAF to expand to from 600,000 to 1,100,000.³¹

While Tet rallied support for the war among the people of South Vietnam, it had the opposite effect in the US. Stunned by the magnitude of the offensive after being told the enemy was beaten, the US public's already fickle support began to erode further. The US Government began looking for a way out.

Paradigm Shift.

The US involvement in South Vietnam began as a nation building project and this effort involved significant support to the RVNAF. In 1961 the RVNAF had

²⁶ Nguyen Duy Hinh, Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire (Wash D.C.: Military History Center, 1980) 3.

²⁷ Dr. Lewis Sorley, A Better War (New York: Harcourt and Brace Co., 1999) 14.

²⁸ William E. Le Gro, Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation (Wash D.C.: Center for Military History, 1985) 4.

²⁹ Ngo Q. Truong, The Easter Offensive (Wash D.C. Center of Military History, 1980) 5.

³⁰ Sorley, 15.

³¹ Sorley, 15.

a strength of nearly 275,000; by 1967 it stood at 633,645.³² While the RVNAF had grown in size and ability, the US had monopolized the conduct of the war to this point. General Westmoreland had little confidence in the ARVN and had Americanized the fighting during Search and Destroy operations. The US and South Vietnam pursued two separate strategies under Westmoreland. The RVNAF was relegated to pacification efforts while the US pursued a combat role. Denied the most modern weapons and equipment, many ARVN units were still armed with M1 rifles and old radios. The affects of General Westmoreland's Americanizing of the war went far beyond the RVNAF being neglected in terms of weapons and training. The RVNAF lost its stature in the eyes of the South Vietnamese people and its public support waned. Americanization of the fighting made enemy claims of US colonialism look legitimate, particularly among the educated classes whom the ARVN were trying to recruit for leadership positions.³³

The Tet offensive caused American strategy in Vietnam to shift. While the offensive was still winding down, President Johnson announced a bombing halt north of the 19th parallel. He also announced his non-candidacy for re-election and called for peace negotiations.³⁴ In March the recently appointed Secretary of Defense Clark submitted a report on Vietnam that read in part:

"Our presence in South Vietnam should be designed to buy the time during which the ARVN and the GVN can develop effective capability. In order to do this, we must deny the enemy access to the populated areas of the country and prevent him from achieving his objectives of controlling the population and destroying the GVN."³⁵

Coupled with these developments was a changing of the guard as General Abrams replaced General Westmoreland as the Commander of US Forces in Vietnam. Abrams brought a different philosophy to the war to support the new strategy. He abandoned the Search and Destroy concept and implemented a strategy of "Clear and Hold". Abrams, like Secretary Clark, saw the war being won by denying the enemy access to the civilian population. Accordingly, he sought

³² Hinh, 11.

³³ Hinh, interview.

³⁴ Hinh, 6.

to build up the strength of the RVNAF, particularly that of the territorial forces. Consisting of company level Regional Forces (RF) and platoon level Popular Forces (PF), the RF/PF were provided military training and served in their home districts. General Abrams's focus on strengthening the RVNAF and the RF/PF forces reflected a larger shift in strategy and there would now be a common objective for the Americans and South Vietnamese. Both were to work together and focus on the pacification effort by destroying the VC infrastructure in the South. The US and ARVN combat units were to engage in operations designed to locate enemy supply caches and to keep the enemy from the civilian population. Abrams also directed that US units work with regular ARVN units on joint operations. Called *Dong Tien* (Progress Together), the program was like a buddy system between the US and ARVN with the goal being the advancement of ARVN training to the point they could take over operations in certain regions on short notice.³⁵ The Navy would use this basic concept throughout the Vietnamization process. The US Navy began a program where a US vessel would accept a few Vietnamese crewmen aboard for training. Once those crewmen became proficient, a few more crewmen would be accepted and trained. Eventually the vessel itself with its trained Vietnamese crew would be turned over to the South Vietnamese Navy. Many of the US military's combat service support branches implemented similar programs to train their Vietnamese counterparts under Vietnamization.

General Abrams worked with the Secretary of Defense to come up with plans for modernizing and improving the RVNAF. Plans for Phase I of this effort, designed to improve the ground combat efficiency of the ARVN through service-wide fielding of the M16 and increased artillery, helicopter and armored units, was approved in October of 1968. General Abrams soon pushed for a Phase II of strengthening the RVNAF, which called for a self-sufficient RVNAF

³⁵ Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 131.

³⁶ Jeffery J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Wash D.C. Center of Military History, 1988) 409.

capable of coping with the VC insurgency after a US-NVA withdrawal.³⁷ Phase II was approved in December. While Vietnamization had not yet been declared a policy, the appointment of General Abrams and the post-Tet strategy of the Johnson Administration laid the foundation for what was to come.

The Nixon Doctrine

1968 was another presidential election year in the US. Republican Richard Nixon won the election having promised to end the war in Vietnam without providing specifics on how it was to be done. Within six months of taking office, Nixon announced a new foreign policy strategy that became known as the Nixon Doctrine. The Nixon Doctrine sought to advance dialogue between the US and the communist bloc on a wide range of issues. It also sought to shift responsibility for sub-theater or localized war - wars not involving conflict between the US and Russia or China - to the Allied nation under threat, especially for the provision of manpower for its self-defense. The US would continue to support its Allies, to include providing a nuclear shield, but it would not try to do everything alone. President Nixon stressed "while a major US role remains indispensable, other nations can and should assume greater responsibilities".³⁸ Vietnamization would be a product of the Nixon Doctrine.

Vietnamization

Almost immediately after taking office, President Nixon initiated National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM 1). NSSM 1 was a survey, to be answered by American commanders and advisors at the Corps level and higher, about the situation in Vietnam. It covered five areas; negotiations, the enemy situation, status of the RVNAF, politics in South Vietnam and American objectives.³⁹ Newly appointed Secretary of Defense Laird traveled to Vietnam in March 1969 to talk to General Abrams about NSSM 1 and to make an assessment of the situation. IN NSSM 1, the majority of American field commanders, to include General Abrams, noted improvement in the fighting ability of the

³⁷ Guenter, 165.

³⁸ Hinh, 14.

³⁹ Clarke, 342.

RVNAF. All were adamant, however, that the RVNAF could only be made capable of controlling the VC insurgency but could not be expected to handle a combined VC-NVA threat. Secretary Laird told General Abrams to accelerate the turnover of the fighting to the RVNAF during his visit to allow for a gradual US withdrawal. General Abrams identified three indicators, which would dictate any withdraw: (1) the enemy threat, (2) progress in pacification, and (3) the extent of improvement in the RVNAF.⁴⁰

Secretary Laird returned to the US and briefed President Nixon on the improvement within the RVNAF. President Nixon quickly authorized a policy to initiate the withdrawal of US combat troops. On 10 April 1969, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger issued NSSM 36, which coined the term Vietnamization and directed "a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war" with its objective of "progressively transferring the fighting from American to South Vietnamese forces".⁴¹ NSSM 36 did not in itself call for an expansion of the RVNAF nor did it predicate the withdraw of the NVA to the initiation of Vietnamization. Instead, it called for phased troop withdrawals to reduce the American presence to an advisory and support effort. Withdrawals were to begin on 1 July 1969 with alternative completion dates of December 1970 (eighteen months), June 1971 (thirty months), and December 1972 (forty-two months)⁴². NSSM 36 seemed to ignore the findings of NSSM 1 in which military commanders stated that the RVNAF could not be made capable to resist a combined NVA-VC threat. By setting dates for withdrawal, NSSM 36 also seemed to disregard the three scenario-based conditions that General Abrams had recommended using for phasing Vietnamization. Instead of timing withdrawals on the situation, they were to be conducted within time constraints. Political pressure, not the military situation, would dictate the course of Vietnamization.

⁴⁰ Clarke, 347.

⁴¹ Clarke, 348.

⁴² Clarke 348.

The timing of Vietnamization would not be the only disconnect between US military and civilian officials. General Abrams and MACV were adamant that the RVNAF would require a large contingent of US combat service support forces (logistics, mechanical and engineer support) and recommended that withdrawals involve only US combat units. Secretary Laird ordered that any withdraw of a combat unit include its slice of combat service support troops. This order added an additional burden to the Vietnamization process. The RVNAF would now take over the highly complex task of becoming self-sufficient in the combat service support areas while fighting a combined VC-NVA threat. This was something not addressed in previous RVNAF improvement plans and was not considered possible by the US military commanders on the ground.

In June of 1969 President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Thieu on Midway Island to discuss Vietnamization. President Thieu agreed with the concept but was insulted by the term; "Vietnamization" was never used in South Vietnam or by South Vietnamese officials.⁴³ President Nixon wanted to try a policy of "cut and try", the gradual replacing US with RVNAF troops on the basis of the military situation with the US still retaining the ability to re-assert itself. President Thieu requested an adjustment of current plans to improve the RVNAF in light of their new responsibilities. He requested an increase in manpower, an upgrade from M41 to M48 tanks, new armored squadrons, a significant restructuring of and increase in artillery, modern aircraft, and a large increase in financial aid.⁴⁴ The vast majority of these requests were turned down as unnecessary or as impractical (due to the limited ability of the RVNAF to utilize and maintain the equipment). Minor increases in artillery and in PF structures were approved, and this was known as the Midway Increase.

Even with the Midway Increase, General Abrams, the JCS and MACV were all convinced that the RVNAF would not be able to handle the combined NVA-VC threat. The JCS submitted a report to Secretary Laird in the fall of 1969

⁴³ Hinh, interview.

that stated the US should be prepared to maintain a significant residual force for years to come unless there was a North Vietnamese withdrawal.⁴⁵ The Secretary was not pleased by this assessment and ordered the JCS and MACV to come up with a plan that would make the RVNAF so capable. General Abrams resisted, understanding that it was impossible to bring the RVNAF up to the necessary level under the prescribed time limit. Laird would not be denied, however, and forced the issue - President Nixon had announced the Vietnamization policy in a speech to the American people in November 1969. General Abrams and MACV responded with the plan, known Phase III, which raised RVNAF manpower to 1,061,505 over a three year period (1970-73) and created new support units including ten artillery battalions, twenty-four truck companies, six helicopter squadrons, PF increases and mortar platoons for the territorial forces.⁴⁶ The Phase III plan, submitted in December 1969, still insisted that there would still be a requirement for a US combat service support presence for the foreseeable future.

Secretary Laird visited Saigon in February 1970 and met with President Thieu and General Abrams to discuss the matter. The South Vietnamese leaders pressed Laird for additions to Phase III, specifically 175mm artillery pieces, field artillery instead of mortars for the territorials, air defense assets and financial support for the RVNAF troops.⁴⁷ Laird returned to Washington and ordered the military to review the South Vietnamese requests. The JCS submitted a revised Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Plan (CRIMP), which authorized a force structure of 1.1 million, provided two 175mm artillery battalions, replaced the proposed territorial mortar batteries with 176 two-gun artillery platoons and provided two anti-aircraft defense battalions.⁴⁸ Approved in June of 1970, the CRIMP gave the South Vietnamese 12 ground combat divisions - 10 infantry, 1 airborne, 1 Marine -

⁴⁴ Clarke, 352.

⁴⁵ Sorley, 137.

⁴⁶ Clarke, 355.

⁴⁷ Clarke, 356.

⁴⁸ Clarke, 356.

50 air squadrons, more than 1,200 naval craft and it incorporated the nearly half million members of the territorial forces into the ARVN.⁴⁹ General Abrams based CRIMP's chances of success on some very specific and not necessarily realistic assumptions: first, that a reduced VC threat would free more troops from local security missions, open up supply lines and raise RVNAF morale; and second, that there would also be a declining NVA presence in South Vietnam; and third, that there would be continued adequate US military and financial support. Finally, it was also assumed that there would be no decline in US support activities from neighboring areas such as Thailand.⁵⁰ General Abrams' and MACV's prediction that there would still be a need for continued American combat service support to the RVNAF was ignored. Laird endorsed the first two years of the three-year CRIMP program, deferring on the last year until he had a better idea of the long-range military and financial situations.

In addition to the continued need for combat service support, General Abrams and MACV had other reservations concerning Vietnamization. The additional expansion in the RVNAF's manpower, designed to make it capable of handling a combined and VC-NVA threat, placed a strain on the already shallow pool of qualified leaders. By 1971, 35% of ARVN battalions had captains as commanders and 80% of the maneuver battalion commanders had less than a year in the job.⁵¹ The RVNAF's leadership problems also had cultural roots. Their officers came from the upper and middle classes who had very little in common with the majority of illiterate troops who served under them. Many of the rich and powerful sent their sons overseas or placed them in government jobs in Saigon to avoid the service, further diminishing the available talent. The South Vietnamese culture was one that centralized power and this also translated in the military. Small unit leaders, especially platoon commanders and non-commissioned officers, were almost powerless and rarely

⁴⁹ Sorley, 214.

⁵⁰ Clarke, 355.

⁵¹ Guenter, 171.

exercised initiative. When a unit commander was killed, that unit normally fell apart.⁵² On the senior level, leadership positions were often awarded for political reasons. President Thieu's position was precarious in the newly created democracy and he often made general officer appointments based on the loyalty of those involved. Even when Thieu relieved incompetent officers at American insistence, those officers were normally re-assigned to other positions rather than cashiered (the shortage of qualified replacements must have had some affect on this as well). High inflation caused by the American presence made RVNAF salaries nearly worthless and resulted in many officers engaging in corrupt activities. The widespread corruption within the RVNAF detracted from its popular support.

Another cultural issue that affected Vietnamization was the high illiteracy rate of the population. In a society in where less than 25% of those eligible attended secondary school and less than half who attended graduated⁵³, it was difficult to develop a large pool of leaders. It was also difficult to train a soldier with a limited education and little if any reading ability to perform high-tech jobs such as mechanics, radio and radar technicians, etc. There was also a shortage of technical manuals written in the Vietnamese language. This problem was particularly troublesome to the Air Force which required large numbers of highly trained, skilled mechanics. Because the overall planning for Vietnamizing the combat support elements was done late and in haste, much of the process was left to be worked out at the unit level. The US and RVNAF sought to overcome this problem by having its mechanics work with their American counterparts for on the job training and by the US providing Mobile Training Teams. While these measures were beneficial, they could not cover all aspects of logistical maintenance support in the required detail. Another burden the Air Force shouldered was that of producing trained pilots. Because the majority of pilots were

⁵² Guenter, 171.

⁵³ Clarke, 467.

trained in the US, they had to be taught English first.⁵⁴ In spite of difficulties associated with RVNAF assuming increased combat service support responsibilities, the relentless pace of Vietnamization continued as the US transferred bases, ports and airfields to the South Vietnamese whether they were ready or not.

The RVNAF was also plagued by high desertion rates caused, in part, by the strong family ties of the South Vietnamese society. In a society where taking care of one's family was the traditional object of loyalty, it was difficult for young men to enlist in the ARVN for the duration (until death, disability or victory) of the conflict. What became known as the 'Family Syndrome' within the RVNAF was the difficulty in moving soldiers outside their home provinces for extended periods. Morale waned and desertions increased in such instances and only the best RVNAF divisions were considered reliable enough to be deployed for long periods.⁵⁵ The lower desertion rates of the RF/PF forces, who always remained in their areas, reflect the value the South Vietnamese soldier placed on his family.

RVNAF Desertions 1968-71

Year	1968	1969	1970	1971
Desertions	116,064	107,942	126,753	140,177
Gross desertions per 1,000		11.5	12.3	13.2
ARVN Combat units		28.2	32.2	35.6
ARVN noncombat units		5.4	5.9	7.0
RF		11.9	10.9	10.7
PF		6.1	7.4	7.9
Net desertions per 1,000	11.8	9.2	10.1	11.2

Source: Guenter Lewy, *America in Vietnam*, page 172.

It should be noted that the RF/PF made up 50% of the RVNAF and accounted for nearly 50% of the casualties.⁵⁶ Their lower desertion rates,

⁵⁴ Hinh, 44.

⁵⁵ Sorley, interview.

⁵⁶ Guenter, 173.

then, can not be attributed to the avoidance of combat and should instead be attributed to the proximity of the RVNAF to their homes and families. The NVA did not have a desertion problem to the same extent because of the difficulty associated with a deserter returning to North Vietnam.

While there were many challenges involved, there was also cause for some optimism at the outset of Vietnamization. The enemy had suffered terribly as a result of the Tet offensive and was on the defensive. The population of South Vietnam was now solidly behind the war effort and the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES), which monitored government control of the countryside, showed favorable increases. The RVNAF had showed marked improvement in recent years both in terms of quantity and quality under previous improvement plans. The new strategy of Clear and Hold seemed to be working. The VC were denied access to supplies of food and manpower as the US and ARVN forces concentrated on the pacification effort.

Vietnamization, more a policy than a plan, was based on certain specific Nixon Administration assumptions: that fighting would continue if negotiations failed, that the American withdrawal would be irreversible, that South Vietnam would require Free World assistance, and that with Free World assistance the RVNAF could cope with the security threats posed by the VC and NVA. The Vietnamization process was broken down into three phases:

1. The first phase consisted of the turning over of ground combat responsibilities to the RVNAF against NVA and VC forces. The US would continue to provide air, naval and logistical support.
2. The second phase involved developing combat service support capabilities within the RVNAF to reach self-reliance. Included in combat service support was an increase in the artillery, air and naval fire power in the RVNAF. This phase was initiated simultaneously with phase I but would take more time to realize. Even after the bulk of US combat forces had been withdrawn, there remained a need for certain US combat support and security units for training for a limited time.
3. The third phase consisted of reducing the American presence to a military advisory role. It had been planned that the advisory and assistance presence would be gradually reduced as South Vietnam grew in strength until such military presence would no longer be needed.⁵⁷

The first withdrawal of US troops was announced at the Midway meeting between Presidents Thieu and Nixon. On 27 August 25,000 troops of the 9th Infantry Division were withdrawn from the Mekong Delta after turning responsibility over to the ARVN⁵⁸. The chart below provides a summary of the American withdraws.

US Redeployments

Increment	Dates	Forces ReDeployed	Forces Remaining
I	Jul-Aug 69	25,000	519,000
II	Sep-Dec 69	35,000	484,000
III	Jan-Apr 70	50,000	434,000
IV	Jul-Oct 70	50,000	384,000
V	Nov-Dec 70	40,000	344,000
VI	Jan-Apr 71	60,000	284,000
VII	May-Jun 71	29,300	254,700
VIII	Jul-Aug 71	28,700	226,000
IX	Sep-Nov 71	42,000	184,000
X	Dec-Jan 72	45,000	139,000
XI	Feb-Apr 72	70,000	69,000
XII	May-Jun 72	20,000	49,000
XIII	Jul-Sep 72	10,000	39,000
XIV	Oct-Nov 72	12,000	27,000

Source: Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, page 72.

The pace of the planned withdrawals was a cause of conflict between General Abrams, MACV, the JCS and the Nixon Administration. Military officials preferred more frequent announcements of smaller increments rather than committing to larger withdraws over greater length of time. This would allow the withdraws to be tied to real-time military assessments and not to projected improvements in the situation. The military also understood that political pressures would not allow the administration to back away from an

⁵⁷ Hinh, 12-17.

⁵⁸ Hinh, 23.

announced withdraw regardless of what the situation in Vietnam called for. General Abrams was particularly incensed about the withdraw of the 50,000 troops in the first three months of 1970 - a period that included the Tet, now a traditional time for NVA attacks.⁵⁹

Cambodia

As Vietnamization continued, MACV planning began on an operation that was to test the ability of the RVNAF and set the stage for further US withdraws. Cambodia had long been a sanctuary for the NVA despite its official neutrality. While subjected to a secret bombing campaign by the US, the enemy forces and supplies in Cambodia had been declared out of reach of US and RVNAF ground forces for political reasons. In early 1970 the neutralist Cambodian Prince Sihanouk was overthrown by his more pro-western Prime Minister Lon Nol. Subsequent North Vietnamese actions against Lon Nol's government provided grounds for US intervention. In April 1970 American and South Vietnamese forces launched an incursion into Cambodia to disrupt NVA forces and destroy supply caches there and to relieve pressure on Lon Nol. The operation was initially deemed a success as the RVNAF fought well and the combined effort killed 4,776 NVA and seized more than 9,300 tons of weapons and supplies.⁶⁰ Being on the offensive seemed to motivate the RVNAF and President Thieu retained units in Cambodia for the duration of the conflict against American advice. Cambodia was the first time that regular ARVN units were moved outside of their CTZ for operations. Previously considered impossible because of the previously mentioned attachment the South Vietnamese troops had to their families and local regions, this maneuver was quite successful with the RF/PF taking over security operations in the CTZs providing regular units. South Vietnamese logistical support was also impressive as the RVNAF primarily used organic assets with only limited American assistance.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Sorley, A Better War, 79.

⁶⁰ Hinh, 67.

⁶¹ Clarke, 418.

Despite the successes, American advisors noted some disturbing trends within the RVNAF effort. Having been trained by Americans, the RVNAF was heavily dependant on US fire support. As the US continued its withdraw from the fighting, there was worry of how the RVNAF would fare without US tactical air and heavy artillery behind them. There were some logistical and support problems as well associated with poor vehicle and depot maintenance - something the RVNAF was never able to properly address. The RVNAF intelligence community was also overwhelmed by the volume of prisoners and intelligence. The RVNAF forces in Cambodia conducted operations in task-organized reinforced battalion and regimental combat teams. While the Regimental Commanders fought well and their associated Corps Commanders showed leadership and initiative at the front, the Division Headquarters remained immobile and played almost no role in the operation.⁶²

The US ground actions into Cambodia caused more of a public outcry than had the "secret" bombing of that country in the spring of 1969. There were widespread anti-war demonstrations, including one at Kent State University where a confrontation between demonstrators and the National Guard left four students dead. Congress showed its disdain for the cross-border operation by symbolically repealing the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. The American people and congress were concerned that the incursion into Cambodia might result in the US being in yet another endless conflict. President Johnson's failure to rally the American people for the Vietnam conflict would continue to haunt his successor. The lack of public support for the war certainly affected the pace of Vietnamization. When Secretary of the Army Resor visited General Abrams in Vietnam in June 1970 (while the Cambodian incursion was in progress) he was mostly concerned about budgetary issues. Resor told General Abrams that two things now dictated how long there could be any American

⁶² Clarke, 418.

military presence in Vietnam, first was US casualty rates and second was costs.⁶³

Laos

As the pace of withdrawing US troops continued throughout the remainder of 1970, the percentage of troops withdrawn naturally increased as compared to the troops remaining. Each contingent withdrawn, therefore, had more of an impact than the previous and put more burden on the RVNAF. While there was cause for concern during this period, there was also reason for optimism. The HES continued to show greater portions of the population and countryside under South Vietnamese control and the RVNAF continued to show improvement. Enemy activity in Southern Vietnam dropped off, presumably due to the affects of the Cambodian incursion. US intelligence assets however, particularly the improved ground sensor systems, began to pick up significant movements of enemy troops and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos. The unpopularity of the US war effort made its impact felt again at this point: The Cooper-Church Amendment of the defense appropriation bill denied funding for any US ground activities in Cambodia or Laos. The enemy's supply lines and sanctuaries were now off limits to US ground forces but not, off course, to those of the RVNAF. The US planners developed a plan which called for an RVNAF thrust into Laos to disrupt the enemies flow of men and supplies. President Thieu strongly endorsed the concept and identified the enemy's supply base in the vicinity of Tchepone as the principle objective.⁶⁴

The RVNAF raid into Laos was strongly supported by US air support and even by artillery stationed within South Vietnam at Khe Sanh. It was scheduled as a three month, four phased operation and it was to be directed at an area that contained some 60,000 NVA troops.⁶⁵ There was some worry among military commanders, particularly General Abrams, that the operation was too difficult a task for the RVNAF at this stage. President Nixon was

⁶³ Sorley, 214.

⁶⁴ Sorley, 234.

⁶⁵ Sorley, 238.

eager for some type of operation to push the North Vietnamese into negotiations and he strongly pushed for the operation.

The US began setting the stage for the RVNAF's thrust into Laos with a B52/Tactical aerial interdiction campaign against the NVA's logistics offensive. Kill boxes were established at four choke points and each box received 27 B52s and 100-150 tactical air sorties a day. By mid-January, the 7th Air Force was devoting 89% of its sorties to anti-infiltration kill boxes and was achieving record kills.⁶⁶

The RVNAF launched its assault on 1 February 1971. It was the first time that the RVNAF was to conduct an operation without any US ground support - not even advisors were accompanying the ARVN formations across the border. The operation was commanded by the I Corps Commander, General Lam, and he had the Marine Division, 1st ARVN Division and the Airborne Division, a Ranger Group and the 1st Armored Brigade. The plan was to push west on Highway 9, establishing fire support bases enroute, with airborne units eventually being helilifted to Tchepone.

Source: Lewis Sorley, *A Better War*, page 244.

The attack got off to a slow start over the difficult terrain and in poor weather. NVA resistance was fierce and Highway 9, broken and flooded in many places, disrupted the advance. By 10 February the RVNAF was 20 kilometers inside Laos and in static positions. Although warned by US advisors about the dangers of losing momentum, President Thieu ordered General Lam to hold in place until further notice. This delay allowed the enemy to reinforce in the region and the NVA eventually committed 33 maneuver battalions to the fight.⁶⁷ The NVA saw the Ho Chi Minh trail as its lifeline and was willing to fight a decisive battle to defend it. The massing NVA formations provided a lucrative target for the US and South Vietnamese Air Forces and they exacted a heavy toll. A total of 1,280 B52 and more than 8,000 tactical air sorties were flown in support of the ground campaign.⁶⁸ On 6 March elements of the 1st Division were helicoptered into the supply base near Tchepone and, after

⁶⁶ Sorley, 240.

⁶⁷ Sorley 244.

⁶⁸ Sorley, 257.

subduing strong resistance, destroyed the enemy supply caches there and were withdrawn.

This was major decision point for the Government of South Vietnam. It had accomplished its stated objectives of disrupting the NVA flow of men and material and of destroying his supply base at Tchepone. There was, however, an opportunity to do even more. With the NVA massing in the area to resist any further assaults, the South Vietnamese had an opportunity to engage the NVA in decisive battle when they still could rely on US air support. Urged by General Abrams to commit additional troops and to push to the fight, President Thieu blinked. He ordered the retrograde of the RVNAF forces almost immediately. President Thieu did not think his armed forces were up to the task at this point and was unwilling to risk the existence of his country at the time. Perhaps he failed to foresee the day when US air support would no longer be unavailable.

By most accounts the RVNAF fought well in its pull out of Laos. There would be noticeable and highly publicized exceptions, such as troops clinging to the skids of medevac helicopters and certain armored units abandoning their equipment, but overall the RVNAF did its job. The NVA suffered heavily from the operation losing almost half of his committed maneuver battalions, 25% of his support troops, 75 of 110 tanks and more than 7,000 individual and crew served weapons.⁶⁹ The South Vietnamese losses were significant as well, with 45% of the troops committed during the heaviest fighting becoming casualties. The RVNAF also lost 96 artillery pieces and 141 armored vehicles, many of which were destroyed by their crews to prevent capture.⁷⁰

The RVNAF's raid into Laos showed the strength and weakness of the Vietnamization process. On the positive side, President Thieu was aggressive enough to commit to the operation. His commander, General Lam, had demonstrated initiative at certain times on the battlefield and had accomplished his assigned missions. The troops had fought well, inflicting

⁶⁹ Sorley, 261.

greater losses than they had suffered. Large quantities of enemy troops, weapons and supplies had been destroyed. In spite of the fact that the NVA had infiltrated more men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail than ever before, he was unable to mount a serious offensive in 1971.

The operation also pointed to the weaknesses within the RVNAF. Many of the armored vehicles and tanks abandoned had simply run out of gas or had maintenance problems; the RVNAF's poor logistical planning and execution cost them dearly. The inability to use fire support properly was identified at the higher levels. In response to this, General Abrams ordered his senior corps advisors to put together mobile support groups to work directly with ARVN Corps Commanders on planning and utilizing fire support and combat support services. There were also leadership problems. The Marine and Airborne Divisions were accustomed to fighting at the brigade level and had never operated as a whole. The commanders had difficulties in their first division-sized operation and caused friction by not following General Lam (both were senior to him). The problem of over-dependence on American fire support was also evident at all levels. President Thieu's hesitation to fight the decisive battle of the war reflected his own concerns over the progress of Vietnamization.

For better or worse the Vietnamization of the war was happening rapidly. By 1971 the RVNAF was handling over 90% of the combat responsibilities.⁷¹ It would soon be tested again after Laos.

The Easter Offensive.

As the leaders of America and South Vietnam took stock of Vietnamization in the aftermath of Laos, the process continued as US public support for the war waned further. General Abrams and President Thieu met to discuss what the Americans had long considered the Achilles heel of Vietnamization - South Vietnamese military leadership. Acting on the advice of General Abrams, President Thieu made several high level personnel changes to put more combat

⁷⁰ Clarke, 474.

effective officers in command. President Thieu's ability to make changes remained hampered by the lack of available and qualified replacements and by political concerns. President Thieu's political posturing and the reduced enemy activity for the rest of 1971 allowed him to win re-election with 91.5% of a vote where 87.7% of those eligible participated.⁷² While Thieu was the only candidate by the time of the vote, the large level of participation was considered a tribute to the South Vietnamese Government's popularity.

Things looked good for South Vietnam and Vietnamization as 1972 began. 1971 had seen the lowest level of fighting in South since the conflict began. Vietnamization was clearly visible: The RVNAF now had 11 Divisions with 58 artillery and 19 armored battalions with appropriate supporting arms and services. The Airborne and Marine Divisions and Ranger Battalions were in General Reserve. The Navy had 1,680 craft and the Air Force more than 1,000 planes. Perhaps most important, the Territorial Forces were now at 550,000. President Nixon reacted to the improvement by announcing that 70,000 US troops, the largest single increment ever, would be withdrawn on 1 May 1972.⁷³

US intelligence began to pick up increased enemy activity across the DMZ in the beginning of 1972. The disruption caused by the Cambodian and Laotian incursions on enemy logistical sanctuaries led him to mass to launch his main assault across the DMZ where his supply lines were shortest. Attacking on 30 March 1972 when the US had only 6,000 combat troops in-country, the NVA assault was a conventional one with 120,000 troops spearheaded by tanks and backed by artillery.⁷⁴ The North Vietnamese made an all-out push in this effort, in an attempt to discredit Vietnamization. They ultimately committed fourteen divisions, twenty-six separate regiments and all its armor and combat support - only one Division in Laos was held in reserve.⁷⁵

Source: George C. Herring, *America's Longest War*, 272.

⁷¹ Hinh, 25.

⁷² Sorley, 280.

⁷³ Sorley, 306.

⁷⁴ Herring, 271.

⁷⁵ Sorley, 326.



The performance of the RVNAF was, as it had been in the past, mixed during the Easter Offensive. While initially holding in the North, the unauthorized withdraw of a unit led to panic among other units and widespread retreat. Quang Tri City fell and Hue was threatened. In supporting attacks from Laos and Cambodia, the NVA attacked Kontum in the II CTZ and An Loc in the III CTZ. The 22nd ARVN Division faltered at Kontum but the 23rd Division was committed and stabilized the situation. The ARVN forces in An Loc held against tremendous odds throughout a two month siege. There were some tense moments where it looked like the country might be lost during the Easter offensive. But eventually the RVNAF steadied.

President Thieu and the JGS showed initiative during the campaign, employing reserve forces and issuing sound guidance. Most importantly, President Thieu began to make much needed leadership changes, sacking lethargic commanders and replacing them with more aggressive and competent generals. President Thieu's decision to send General Truong, one of South Vietnam's best Generals, to relieve General Lam and command the hard pressed

I Corps in the north, had the greatest impact. Truong soon stabilized the situation and began pushing the NVA back, eventually retaking the city of Quang Tri. The VNAF made its presence felt, flying 25% of the tactical air sorties during the Allied response to the Easter offensive.⁷⁶ The mobile fire support training teams that General Abrams' had sent to the ARVN Corps paid off as the ARVN employed and coordinated fire support far more effectively in the Easter Offensive than they had in Lam Son 719.⁷⁷

Like Thieu, President Nixon also showed initiative and resolve when faced with the Easter Offensive. Furious that the North Vietnamese would try to take advantage of the American political situation and determined not to be the first US President to lose a war, Nixon ordered bombing at previously unseen levels. Designated Operation Linebacker, the US response involved 4,759 B52 sorties and more than 55,000 tactical air sorties and, at its high point, included eight cruisers and thirty eight destroyers providing fire support. Linebacker I targeted previously off limit sites in North Vietnam and involved the mining of the ports, including Haiphong.⁷⁸ Linebacker reinforced RVNAF morale and helped turn the tide as the NVA suffered terribly under the bombardment. With its economy and transportation systems in ruin and its troops sustaining tremendous losses, the NVA began to withdraw by mid-May. Overall the NVA sustained over 100,000 casualties out of the 200,000 troops it committed and also lost more than half his artillery and tanks.⁷⁹ It would take the enemy three years to rebuild for his next effort.

The assessment of the RVNAF's performance during the Easter offensive began while the fighting was still going on. American commanders, including General Abrams, realized the country would have fallen were it not for US air strikes. With the prospect of a complete American withdrawal in the future, it was obviously dangerous to have the South Vietnamese so dependent on US air. Was there time to break this dependence? Was the necessary leadership

⁷⁶ Sorley, 327.

⁷⁷ Sorley, interview.

⁷⁸ Sorley, 327-8.

available? While some leaders had distinguished themselves, such as General Truong, there was a clear shortage of competent senior officers. General Abrams had been particularly poignant about the shortcomings of RVNAF leadership during the Easter Offensive. When the Chief of the RVNAF requested additional weapons and equipment, General Abrams told him "Equipment is not what you need. You need men that *fight*. And you need *officers* that will fight and will lead the men".⁸⁰ The shortage of sound leadership continued to hamper the RVNAF's ability to fight and inspired little confidence within its ranks. The South Vietnamese did not help this situation with their promotion processes. In addition to the fact that many senior promotions were made on the basis of political loyalty, many company and field grade promotions were never simply awarded. The RVNAF had only one-third of its authorized strength in Colonels and had little more than one-half its authorized strength in Lieutenant Colonels. In 1970 one promotion board only 10% of the promotions made were permanent; the rest were merely temporary grade changes.⁸¹ Low wages and poor promotion opportunities provided little incentive for officers to serve.

A senior South Vietnamese General put some perspective on the RVNAF's leadership problems. This officer explained to General Abrams that the American type of leadership was new to them. Under the French, officers had only been taught to care for themselves and not worry about the welfare of the troops or civilians. This General had hope for the future, as a new crop of officers, having never served with the French, were being developed with a new sense of duty and professionalism. He saw a new generation of leaders eventually rising to ranks where they could positively influence the future of South Vietnam.⁸² As the US withdraw continued in the aftermath of the Easter Offensive, the development of RVNAF leadership became a race against

⁷⁹ Sorley, 336.

⁸⁰ Sorley, 335.

⁸¹ Clarke, 374.

⁸² Sorley, interview.

time. RVNAF leadership shortcomings would remain among the greatest problem facing Vietnamization.

Despite General Abrams' assertion that the RVNAF did not need more equipment, the US did provide replacements for losses incurred during the Easter Offensive under Project Enhance. Project Enhance involved the delivery of three battalions worth of 175mm guns, two M48 tank battalions, two air defense battalions as well as aircraft and naval vessels.⁸³

The Search for Peace

The US had never intended to fight a war in Vietnam. Seeking only to ensure a non-communist South Vietnam, the US was gradually drawn into the conflict by the collapse of the South Vietnamese Government and its military. Once committed to combat, the US had initially rejected North Vietnamese overtures for negotiations, fearing that the any resulting political resolution might favor the communists. After years in a brutal and seemingly endless war, with its public support waning and its options shrinking, it was the US which pressed for negotiations. Both Presidents Johnson and Nixon had waged war not to seek victory, but only to obtain an honorable peace. There had been fruitless negotiations in the past, with alternating bombing halts and campaigns, but after the Easter Offensive President Nixon was searching for a way out with renewed vigor. He had campaigned for president promising to end the war and, although the US was withdrawing its ground troops, there was no end in sight for the US commitment. Vietnam was a seeping wound for the Administration. As President Nixon began gearing up for his re-election bid, he was willing to make great compromises to bring about a settlement. The North Vietnamese had suffered great losses in the Easter Offensive and were also eager to negotiate for a settlement.

Cease-Fire: False Peace

In October 1972 the US and North Vietnam achieved a breakthrough in negotiations when the North Vietnamese advanced a nine point plan titled

⁸³ Hinh, 17.

"Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam".⁸⁴ In it, North Vietnam dropped its demand for the overthrow of President Thieu and the institution of a coalition government as prerequisites to peace. For its part, the US agreed to drop its insistence for an NVA withdraw from South Vietnam by remaining silent on the subject. The South Vietnamese, who had boycotted the negotiations, objected to three elements of the proposal. First, the proposal would create a National Council of Reconciliation and Concord (NCRC) which was to develop political courses of action to resolve outstanding issues and coordinate elections. While the agreement supposedly gave President Thieu veto power over the NCRC, the NCRC too closely resembled a coalition government for South Vietnamese liking. Second, the South Vietnamese objected to the proposal allowing the NVA to retain its forces in South Vietnam. Third, the South Vietnamese noted the proposal made no mention of a DMZ dividing two separate nations.⁸⁵ The South Vietnamese also pointed out many discrepancies between the Vietnamese-English translations of the proposal, all of which were slanted to the communist benefit.⁸⁶ President Thieu refused to sign on to the proposal for these reasons and appeared on television to inform his countrymen of his concerns.

When the US went back to reconcile these concerns, the North Vietnamese balked. Betting that US public opinion would force President Nixon's hand, they refused to bargain on the South Vietnamese objections. Nixon responded by renewing the bombing of North Vietnam with a "Linebacker II" campaign in December of 1972. Twelve days later the North Vietnamese were back at the negotiating table. In addition to bombing North Vietnam, President Nixon also told President Thieu that if he refused to go along with a future peace agreement, the US would sign a unilateral agreement with North Vietnam and would suspend all support to South Vietnam. If President Thieu signed the

⁸⁴ Hinh, 116.

⁸⁵ Hinh, 117.

⁸⁶ Hinh, interview.

agreement, President Nixon promised the US would respond militarily if the North Vietnamese committed grave violations of any agreement.⁸⁷

In addition to promising to re-intervene if necessary, the US also began pouring in supplies and equipment under a program called Enhance Plus to strengthen the RVNAF prior to any restrictions resulting from an agreement. The shipment of aircraft included in the Enhance Plus program made the South Vietnamese Air Force the fourth largest in the world in terms of numbers of aircraft.⁸⁸ As always, the numbers were misleading. The vast majority of aircraft were helicopters, planned for and useful in campaigns against guerilla forces where tactical mobility was crucial. As it turns out, the South Vietnamese would end up in a conventional conflict against an enemy with sophisticated AA defenses. These weapons would take a terrible toll of RVNAF aircraft, particularly of the vulnerable helicopters.⁸⁹ Many of the aircraft provided under Enhance Plus would go unused for want of trained pilots, or would be used for scavenging after military assistance cuts made replacement parts unavailable.

Having been severely stung by the Linebacker II bombing campaign, the North Vietnamese made some cosmetic changes to their peace plan to make it more palatable to South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese still insisted that they be allowed to maintain their troops already in South Vietnam and demanded that the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), the political arm of the VC, be recognized as a diplomatic entity. While the US was willing to accept these terms, President Thieu protested once again. None too confident about the US' resolve to re-intervene and enraged that the PRG might be given recognition, Thieu tried to stand firm against the agreement. Eventually the US pressure on Thieu proved too much for him to resist. President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, repeated the US' promise to stand by South Vietnam by retaliating against NVA

⁸⁷ Hinh, 120.

⁸⁸ Hinh, 117.

⁸⁹ Clarke, 445.

violations, by providing continued military equipment support and by proving a robust level of economic support.⁹⁰ Nixon and Kissinger also reiterated the US' willingness to conclude a separate peace with North Vietnam and to cut off all support to South Vietnam if Thieu did not sign the agreement. In one particularly direct letter, President Nixon reminded Thieu what had happened to his predecessor, Diem, when he had defied American wishes. President Thieu clearly had no choice and, declaring "I have done all that I can for my country", he signed on to the agreement.⁹¹

The South Vietnamese would put great stock in President Nixon's pledge to re-intervene. They established a hotline with the US Airbase in Thailand and maintained updated B52 targeting and forward air controller teams. In case of attack, the RVNAF understood it had to hold for 7 - 14 days until the US could surge its air.⁹²

The Agreement on "Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam" or "Paris Peace Agreement" was signed on 27 January 1973 in Paris. Basically, it called for a cease-fire in place, the establishment of a NCRC, the return of prisoners, the withdraw of all US forces within sixty days, and a reduction of the flow of military equipment into the country to one for one exchange for combat losses. The Agreement was to be enforced by international commissions and joint military committees. The details of the of the agreement are largely unimportant because they were never followed.

The Results of Vietnamization

The Paris Peace Agreement never led to peace between the two Vietnams. It did, however, mark the end of Vietnamization - the fight was now South Vietnam's alone. Before discussing the subsequent fighting, it is important to understand the military ramifications of the Agreement and the South Vietnamese strategy.

⁹⁰ Sorley, interview.

⁹¹ Herring, 281-2.

⁹² General Cao Van Vien, The Final Collapse (Wash D.C.: Military History Center, 1983) 45-6.

In 1969 the Allied effort in Vietnam included 22 Divisions (8 US with one separate Brigade, 2 ROK, 12 RVNAF) to counter the combined NVA/VC threat. After the Allies withdrawal, there were only 13 RVNAF Divisions to face the same threat. The RVNAF Divisions were also significantly less mobile and under-gunned compared to their US Division counterparts. Where the US had 5,000 helicopters in South Vietnam, the RVNAF had only 500. B52 sorties had peaked at 20,000 a year during the US' participation, the RVNAF would have none. RVNAF Divisions also had 60% less organic fire support than American divisions.⁹³ By its very design the Vietnamization process had significantly lowered the combat power of the forces defending South Vietnam. The withdrawal of all US advisors also hurt the RVNAF. While the advisory program had had shortcomings, it did provide benefit. The advisors provided the most objective evaluations of their Vietnamese counterparts available and helped coordinate the efficient use of complicated US equipment.

The strength of the NVA grew as that of their enemy waned. With over 290,000 men in South Vietnam at the time of the Agreement (see chart below), the NVA immediately increased its infiltration of manpower south. While the RVNAF would outnumber the NVA and VC in pure numbers, the RVNAF had to devote a larger percentage of its troops to rear echelon positions to man its logistical, training and administration commands.

NVA/VC in South Vietnam, January 1973

Category	CTZ I	CTZ II	CTZ III	CTZ IV	Total
Combat	79,450	31,200	27,300	29,050	167,000
Admin/Log	35,240	18,500	17,315	14,065	85,120
Guerillas	5,928	11,017	10,730	13,325	41,000
Total	120,618	60,717	55,345	56,440	293,120

Source: General Cao Van Vien, *The Final Collapse*, page 34.

The North Vietnamese also increased its flow of military supplies south after the cease-fire. NVA documents boast that the injection of supplies

⁹³ Hinh, 71-2.

reached 140,000 tons between January and September 1973, more than four times as much as in 1972.⁹⁴ The NVA showed increasing sophistication during this period, infiltrating T54 tanks, batteries of 130mm artillery, AT4 anti-tank missiles and the most advanced Soviet surface to air missiles.⁹⁵ The North Vietnamese also worked hard on improving the Ho Chi Minh trail, widening it and even paving it in certain areas. They also ran a pipeline from north to south to support their growing fuel needs, established a radio system and even constructed thirteen airfields in South Vietnam.⁹⁶ By the end of 1973 the NVA had tripled its artillery and increased its number of tanks sixfold.⁹⁷ By March of 1974 the NVA had more than 185,000 combat troops in the south, 700 tanks, 24 anti-aircraft regiments and was still growing.⁹⁸ The military balance of power was shifting dramatically in favor of North Vietnam. The scales tipped further when the first revelations of the Watergate scandal surfaced in April of 1973. The likelihood of the Nixon Administration living up to its promises to South Vietnam would become remote in the future.

To compound these difficulties, the strategy adopted by the Thieu Administration put the RVNAF into an impossible situation. Thieu misread the situation in Vietnam, betting that the North Vietnamese would revert back to a guerilla war or, if they did launch a conventional attack, that the US would re-intervene. Accordingly he issued his four No's: No territory or outpost relinquished to the enemy; no coalition government; no negotiation with the enemy; and no communist or neutralist activity in South Vietnam.⁹⁹ By refusing to yield any land, even forbidding his commanders to request pullbacks, Thieu forced the RVNAF to be scattered thinly across the country. The RVNAF's manpower did not allow for this in any depth, nor did allow for the maintaining of any strategic reserve. The success of Vietnamization was in peril as a result of the Peace Agreement and President Thieu's.

⁹⁴ Sorley, 363. Guenter, 205-6.

⁹⁵ Guenter, 206. Le Gro, 39-40.

⁹⁶ Phillip B. Davidson, Vietnam at War (New York: Oxford Press, 1988) 739. Le Gro, 39.

⁹⁷ Sorley, 365.

⁹⁸ Guenter, 206.

The Third Indochina War

Reports of the North Vietnamese violations of the Agreement soon reached President Nixon. Movement on the Ho Chi Minh trail was reported to be so heavy there were actually traffic jams of military vehicles moving toward South Vietnam. Nixon was presented with plan to bomb the trail along southern Laos in retaliation for these violations. He marked the block "APPROVE" on the plan but nothing of substance ever came of it.¹⁰⁰ In August 1973 the US Congress made the matter mute by passing the Fulbright-Aiken amendment which cutoff all funding for US military forces in or over or from the shore of North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos or Cambodia".¹⁰¹ A weakened President Nixon, on the defensive after Watergate, could offer little more than protests.

Almost immediately after the Peace Agreement was in effect, the North Vietnamese launched an offensive with the intent of expanding the population base under its control. Called "Land Grab 73", the offensive involved four division sized attacks, three of which the RVNAF repulsed. The RVNAF held the initiative for the remainder of 1973 as the NVA, still weakened from the Easter Offensive, laid low to conserve its strength.

After their unsuccessful offensive in 1973 the North Vietnamese tried to step up the political pressure on South Vietnam with a propaganda offensive. While it was ineffective in South Vietnam, the propaganda did have an impact in the international arena, particularly in the US. Working with Jane Fonda and her husband Tom Hayden, who actually had use of a US Congressional conference room and provided briefings to congressional aides, the North Vietnamese propaganda effort in the US had three objectives: 1) Reduce US military and economic support for South Vietnam; 2) ensure the US did not re-enter the war; 3) build up the Provisional Revolutionary Government to be seen

⁹⁹ Davidson, 740.

¹⁰⁰ Sorley, 363. Guenter, 204.

¹⁰¹ Sorley 364.

as a legitimate government.¹⁰² The true focus of the effort was to subvert US support by making President Thieu and the South Vietnamese appear unworthy of support. North Vietnamese claims of South Vietnamese treaty violations and attempts to disrupt the peace process, while widely untrue, were carrying weight with the vocal anti-war faction within the US which remained active even after America's withdraw. Democratic opponents of the President Nixon used claims of South Vietnamese corruption and human rights abuses to undercut the Administration's Vietnam policy. An example of the influence the North Vietnamese propaganda had over Congress was evident in their claim that South Vietnam held over 200,000 political prisoners. South Vietnam held only 35,000 prisoners of all types at the time and only had the capacity to hold 50,000 at any given time - yet the US press began to circulate reports of widespread political detentions and reported the alleged use of "tiger cages" to hold captives.¹⁰³ The US Congress promptly ordered that no US funding could be used for South Vietnamese police functions. The poison spread by the North Vietnamese and their now American friends would bear more fruit in future Congressional budgets.

US plans called for \$1.6 billion of military assistance in Fiscal Year (FY) 1974 to support the build up of the RVNAF under the CRIMP program. MACV determined this was the minimum amount with which the RVNAF could face a combined NVA/VC threat. Congress, tired of the financial burden and swayed by the protests of Fonda and the Hayden, authorized only \$1.1 billion.¹⁰⁴ The shortfall was agitated by affects of high inflation and by the costs of more frequent than anticipated combat. The results of the under-funding were soon felt among the RVNAF. All unit level training ceased, helicopter use was cut by 70%, rifle ammo by 50%, artillery fires were severely restricted and the use of motor vehicle was cut by 45%.¹⁰⁵ To make the situation worse, the US had not replaced a single aircraft or naval vessel was replaced as authorized

¹⁰² Davidson, 745.

¹⁰³ Davidson, 745.

¹⁰⁴ Le Gro, 84.

in the one for one replacement provision in the Paris Peace Agreement. Under the strain of the budget cuts, the RVNAF's Chief of JGS estimated that the RVNAF would run out of fuel by May of 1975 and out of ammunition in June.¹⁰⁶ To re-direct money into combat operations, President Thieu (under US advice) cut the food/housing subsidy paid to RVNAF servicemembers. This had a huge impact on the morale and welfare of the RVNAF and 88% of the servicemembers reported a decline in their standard of living over the previous year.¹⁰⁷ Desertions, always a problem, increased as men tried to find other means to feed their families. Corruption also increased under the economic hardships of low pay and rampant inflation.

The NVA's strength was growing in 1974 as the RVNAF began to weaken under budget constraints. Replenished by men and supplies rolling down the Ho Chi Minh trail, the NVA began to ponder its next offensive. Still not strong enough to mount an all out push, the North Vietnamese settled for a series of strategic raids across South Vietnam. With one of their objectives being to further lower South Vietnamese and RVNAF morale, the NVA struck in the I, II and IV CTZs between May and September. While the NVA made some gains, the RVNAF fought hard, particularly in the spring and summer before the full affects of the budget cuts were felt. Where the RVNAF gave ground, it was only because of overwhelming NVA superiority in terms of manpower and fire support.

The ability and desire of the US Government to support South Vietnam suffered a blow when President Nixon resigned from office in August of 1974. Nixon had been determined not to be the first US president to lose a war and, although not in the manner he desired, he would be spared that indignity. While weakened by the Watergate scandal, he had at least believed in the cause of South Vietnam. Had he not been consumed by Watergate, he would have likely fought hard to maintain a robust level of support to the South

¹⁰⁵ Davidson, 748.

¹⁰⁶ Sorley, 368.

¹⁰⁷ Davidson, 748. Le Gro, 70-72.

Vietnamese. When Gerald Ford was sworn in as president he inherited a hostile congress and a suspicious public. Ford's ability to effect policy related to Vietnam had been severely degraded by the actions of his predecessor.

If the budget cutbacks in FY 74 degraded the RVNAF's ability to fight, the FY 75 budget mortally wounded South Vietnam. Pre-Peace Agreement proposals put the required US assistance at \$1.45 billion dollars (in 1973 dollars) for FY 75. When all was said and done in the US Congress, only \$700 million was authorized.¹⁰⁸ That figure was further diluted by the fact that it had to pay for the operation of the Defense Affairs Office (DAO), the successor to MACV. This left less than \$500 million for the RVNAF; about a third of what was required.¹⁰⁹ Compounding this problem were the residual shortfalls from the FY 74 budget which remained. High inflation continued to eat into the purchasing power of the funding. The results were predictable. The Air Force cut its sorties by 70%, inactivated more than 200 planes, re-called 400 pilots in training from the US and converted a thousand trainees into infantry. The Navy inactivated more than 600 vessels and cut its patrols by 72%.¹¹⁰ The reduction of US support came as the fighting increased and the survival of South Vietnam was at stake. The affects of the budget cuts can be seen by comparing the daily allowance for ammunition between US forces in Vietnam against the South Vietnamese allowance:

Rounds per Day, FY 74

Type of Ammo	US	RVNAF	% Change
Rifle, 5.56mm	13	1.6	- 88%
Machine Gun	165	10.6	- 94%
105mm Artillery	36.5	6.4	- 82%

Source: Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, Page 77. Percentages computed by the Author.

¹⁰⁸ Le Gro, 85.

¹⁰⁹ Le Gro, 87.

¹¹⁰ Sorley, 367.

Trained by the US in to fight a lavish war with B52s, extensive close air and artillery support and nearly unlimited ammunition, the RVNAF struggled under its new constraints. Within the RVNAF there was a sense of lethargy and hopelessness as their support was cut and the enemy grew stronger. As South Vietnam faced its greatest military challenge in its young existence, prospects for success were dim.

The weakening of the RVNAF did not go unnoticed by the North Vietnamese leadership. NVA Senior General Dung, who would later lead the final offensive against South Vietnam, noted that " (President) Thieu was then forced to fight a poor man's war. Enemy firepower had decreased by nearly 60%...Its (the RVNAF's) mobility was also reduced by half".¹¹¹ General Dung's assessment of the RVNAF's abilities and the US' resolve was uncannily accurate. In October of 1974 Dung and the NVA's senior leadership agreed upon the following:

1. The puppet troops (RVNAF) were militarily, politically and weakening every day and our forces were quite stronger than the enemy in the south.
2. The US was facing mounting difficulties both at home and in the world, and its potential for aiding the puppets was rapidly declining. The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the US and had led to the resignation of the reactionary President Nixon. The US faced a economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis.
3. We had created a chain of mutual support, had strengthened our reserve forces and material and were steadily improving our strategic and political systems.
4. The movement to demand peace, improve the people's livelihood, democracy, national independence and Thieu's overthrow in various cities was gaining momentum.¹¹²

The North Vietnamese correctly concluded that US re-intervention into Vietnam was unlikely. Still, as they began planning another offensive to take advantage of the situation they decided to test, one final time, whether or not America would honor its promise to re-intervene. Having suffered heavily during the Easter Offensive, the NVA had to be completely sure that B52s, F4s and naval gunfire wouldn't suddenly reappear to destroy years worth of military build up. To test US

¹¹¹ Davidson, 748.

¹¹² Le Gro, 132.

resolve the NVA launched a conventional attack in CTZ III against Phuoc Long Province. The offensive began in December, and its success highlighted the problems facing the post-Vietnamization South Vietnam. Confused by diversionary attacks, the ARVN III Corps Commander failed to identify the main effort until it was too late. One by one scattered ARVN outposts fell until the NVA converged around Phuoc Long City. With the Airborne and Marine Divisions actively engaged in CTZ I, there were no strategic reserves left when the NVA laid its siege. Lacking strategic lift and reserve troops, the ARVN could only helicopter in a battalion - the only regular troops in Phuoc Long City - and they arrived late with the battle already decided. Still, along with two RF battalions, the ARVN battalion fought hard against overwhelming odds. Pounded by artillery, facing tanks and outnumbered, the ARVN were simply overwhelmed.

The US' reaction to the NVA's blatant violation of the Paris Peace Agreement was a diplomatic protest condemning North Vietnamese aggression. The North Vietnamese now had their answer as to whether the US would stand by President Nixon's pledge to re-intervene. They did not wait long to capitalize on the US' failure to honor the promise.

In March 1975 the NVA launched an attack against Ban Me Thuot in CTZ II. Heavily supported by tanks and long range artillery, the NVA achieved tactical surprise and overcame the South Vietnamese forces in little more than a week. Counterattack efforts failed because the over-extended RVNAF could not mass sufficient forces to launch a concerted thrust. The Family Syndrome was also evident again as many of the ARVN troops rushed to find their dependants instead of fighting. The danger of President Thieu's "hold all" strategy was becoming apparent.

About this time a \$300 million supplemental aid package for the RVNAF was working its way through Congress. The South Vietnamese hosted several Congressional delegations in the spring of 1975, most proving to be hostile to additional support to the Thieu regime. Reality now hit

President Thieu, and he recognized that the US would never re-intervene to save South Vietnam. He also saw the capability of the RVNAF waning as US financial support dwindled and he correctly surmised that the \$300 million supplement would be defeated. Shaken by the losses of Phuoc Long and Ban Me Thuot and failing American support, President Thieu belatedly ordered a change in strategy. Instead of holding everywhere, the RVNAF would pull back to hold vital regions. The following map shows Thieu's intentions to hold/recapture all of MR III and IV and about half of MR II. The withdrawals were to be carried out in secret, with the RF and PF forces left behind and the civilian population kept in the dark.

soon as the pull back began, the people were able to ascertain what was happening and refugees began to clog the retrograde route. Communist forces cut the route in several areas and shelled the military/civilian columns on the road causing mass panic. Many RVNAF troops left their units to try to save their families and discipline broke down. The populations in the abandoned areas lost confidence in Thieu. In some cases the President went on television to re-assure them that certain places would be held even as the withdraw was taking place. The NVA exploited the situation by pressing its attacks and the situation quickly became a rout.

As South Vietnam collapsed upon itself, the Chief of Staff of the US Army, General Fredrick C. Weyland, visited Saigon in early April. There he met with General Vien, Chairman of the JGS. General Vien pleaded for US B52 strikes; General Fredrick C. Weyland reminded Vien that that would take Congressional authorization, now a highly unlikely event. Instead, General Weyland suggested the RVNAF somehow obtain a battlefield victory that might spur Congress to approve the previously discussed \$300 aid package. Such an effort was now beyond the capability of the RVNAF and was probably too late anyway.

There is some reason to believe that approval of General Vien's request for B52s may have led to different battlefield outcome. While the potency of the South Vietnamese Air Force had been severely degraded due to maintenance and fuel shortages and by losses to ever-improving NVA AA defenses, the Air Force did influence the battle of Xuan Loc. Located about 40 miles north of Saigon, it was defended by the 18th ARVN Division against a four division NVA attack. Here the Air Force employed three 15,000 pound "Daisy Cutter" bombs that the US had designed to clear landing zones. Dropped from C130 aircraft, the Daisy Cutters devastated the attacking forces. Buoyed by their air support (rumors even circulated the B52s were back), the 18th Division held out against four NVA

divisions before being pushed back. Had the US supplied more of these weapons - 27 were approved and only 6 delivered, including three two days before the fall of Saigon - perhaps the RVNAF could have fought more effectively.¹¹³

The 22nd Division would also fight valiantly as the ring tightened around Saigon but the overall performance of the RVNAF was dismal. With supplies and ammunition dwindling, areas containing their families being abandoned and with defeat now certain, the RVNAF lost its will and ability to fight. President Thieu resigned and President Ford declared in mid-April that the war was over for America. On 30 April 1975 an NVA tank crashed through the gates of the governmental palace and the interim South Vietnamese Government surrendered. South Vietnam ceased to exist as a nation.

Vietnamization in Retrospect

The US became responsible for the creation of South Vietnam as nation when it urged Diem not to allow the free elections required by the 1954 Geneva Agreement. The US would also be largely responsible for the loss of South Vietnam by failing to properly support the Vietnamization effort. What had gone wrong?

Some of the problems are related to the inherent foreign policy weaknesses of a democracy. The frequent leadership changes in the White House made long term foreign policy planning difficult. An agenda agreed upon by one administration may not be pursued by the next. During America's twenty one year involvement in Vietnam beginning with President Eisenhower, there had been five US Presidents - four in the last twelve years - making decisions and influencing policy on Vietnam. The roots of Vietnamization's failure can be traced to the often inconsistent strategic decisions made by these many men.

The US erred in forcing the pace of democratization on President Diem. It was too much to ask of a society and culture with no democratic background to

¹¹³ Vien, Final Collapse, 127.

allow for the diversity required of a democracy. The US recognized this in building South Korea. There democracy was allowed to be phased in over a long period, allowing the government time to strengthen the institutions required to run a country. In Vietnam a new US administration demanded democracy from the outset, causing great disruption within the country as factions vied for power. This hampered the development of the RVNAF because President Diem and his successor, President Thieu, naturally factored in the political loyalty of military commanders as a criteria for their advancement and command. Had the rush for democracy not been an issue until the elimination of the outside threat, the Presidency could have become a unifying element within the society. The Presidents could have focused more on an officer's ability than his party affiliation and more credible leadership would have been available for Vietnamization.

The US' authorization of the coup against Diem, designed to stimulate democratic reform, also hurt the Vietnamization process. It further fragmented South Vietnam by eliminating all sense of order within the country. Subsequent military juntas alienated the people and made them suspicious of the military.

In the midst of this period, the Kennedy Administration failed to do something that the Eisenhower Administration told them must happen for success to be possible in Vietnam. Kennedy refused to enforce the neutrality of Laos. While intervening Laos may have caused a wider war with China, Kennedy had declared the free and democratic South Vietnam as vital to the national security of the US. If that were true, the US should have initiated action in Laos and risked the Chinese response. If it were not true, the US should have never stated it as such and should have never intervened in South Vietnam. As it was, the US did not act decisively in Laos and because of that, the North Vietnamese would always own the initiative in the conflict. From their protected sanctuaries along the Ho Chi Minh trail, the NVA launched the offenses that destroyed South Vietnam and Vietnamization.

President Johnson's decision not to ask for a declaration of war and to instead pursue the Tonkin Gulf Resolution was another strategic mistake which had a negative impact on Vietnamization. Johnson failed to involve the American people in the conflict and failed to provide a blueprint for victory. The lack of US public support for the war would eventually prove detrimental to Vietnamization. In fighting the war, President Johnson applied the gradual escalation called for under the Flexible Response strategy. Johnson sought to do only the minimum necessary to influence North Vietnam's actions, not to defeat them. Johnson sought the moral high ground by showing restraint - the North Vietnamese saw this as lack of commitment. The gradualism of the Flexible Response strategy would also permeate all aspects of Vietnamization. There too the US was reactionary instead of aggressive, providing the RVNAF new equipment such as TOWs and AA batteries only after the NVA seized the initiative with the use of heavy tanks and jet aircraft. By the time the US began Vietnamization, the American public had grown sick of the seemingly endless war. With its economy in peril and people divided, the US lost interest and patience. Congress' failure to adequately fund Vietnamization can be attributed to public pressure resulting from Johnson's failure to rally the American people to the cause.

The strategy pursued by General Westmoreland also hurt Vietnamization before it began. The Search and Destroy strategy left the South Vietnamese villages and its people open to communist subversion. It led to large scale battles where US weapons and bombs destroyed significant amounts of the South Vietnamese countryside and it alienated the people of South Vietnam from the goals of their government. It also led to a further loss of American public support as images of soldiers burning down villages and herding unhappy villagers hit US networks. Westmoreland further retarded Vietnamization by neglecting the development of the RVNAF during his tenure. Relegated to pacification efforts, the RVNAF lost credibility in the eyes of its people and its fighting skills. The RVNAF was poorly trained and equipped and was

vulnerable to propaganda claims by the communists that they were merely colonial puppets.

The shift in US strategy after the Tet Offensive in 1968 brought about the unofficial start of Vietnamization and did bring about some improvements in the RVNAF. The RVNAF began to get modern weapons, became involved in fighting and was included in a joint US-RVNAF strategy of Clear and Hold. This strategy often bore fruit as the NVA were denied access to the South Vietnamese population and its support. Under the Clear and Hold strategy and the Nixon Administration's subsequent Vietnamization policy the RVNAF grew in size and ability. The US began to withdraw its troops as the RVNAF grew more capable. Unfortunately the pace of withdrawals was set by US political concerns and not the military situation. This error led to a military balance of power that increasingly favored the communists. Still, the RVNAF appeared to be holding its own, albeit with extensive US logistical and fire support assistance. To counter the successes of the Clear and Hold strategy and Vietnamization, the North Vietnamese were forced to launch the type of conventional attack that made them vulnerable to mass US air support. As long as the South Vietnamese maintained the Clear and Hold strategy and had US air support, success seemed possible.

The Paris Peace Agreement was another blow to the prospects of Vietnamization's success. In it, the US allowed the North Vietnamese to retain the units it had in South Vietnam in place. It also recognized the PRG, the political arm of the VC, as political entity. The NVA units were a direct threat to the RVNAF and Vietnamization; the recognition of the PRG was a direct affront to the South Vietnamese Government.

To make matters worse, the US failed to live up to the provision in the Peace Agreement that authorized the one for one replacement of weapons and equipment lost in combat. The NVA's losses were more than replaced by their communist supporters and the balance of power shifted greatly in their favor with the signing of the Agreement.

The US would also failed to honor the personal commitment made by President Nixon to President Thieu that the US would intervene to retaliate against wanton North Vietnamese Peace Agreement violations. Made ineffective by Watergate, with a hostile Congress that eventually outlawed any US combat role, Nixon's promise proved to be empty words.

Coupled with the failure to provide combat replacements and to honor Nixon's pledge was Congress' failure to adequately finance Vietnamization. Under pressure from a public whose support had never been cultivated, Congress was eventually providing less than half the support necessary to fund the programs agreed upon Vietnamization. This problem was aggravated by high inflation which cut South Vietnam's purchasing power and by costs of heavy combat as the communists pushed their advantage.

To summarize, Vietnamization's failure has roots in the US strategy(ies) in Vietnam. Before the Vietnamization process began, it was hampered by the US' insistence on a swift transition to democracy. This caused great turmoil in a society with no experience in democracy and led to an atmosphere of suspicion within the country's leadership. The lack of leadership proved to be an Achilles' heel to Vietnamization. Some incompetent leaders were retained because of political loyalties, other competent leaders were not advanced or retained because of political differences. Another event that would eventually hurt Vietnamization was the decision not to enforce the neutrality of Laos. Intervening in Vietnam without enforcing a neutral Laos was foolish and it surrendered the initiative to the North Vietnamese for the length of the conflict. Johnson's decision not to declare war or seek victory in Vietnam would also damage Vietnamization. A disgruntled American public grew tired of the whole burden and was instrumental getting aid cut off. After the US committed ground troops but before Vietnamization began, the adoption of the Search and Destroy strategy and the neglect of RVNAF hampered future attempts at developing the RVNAF.

During the Vietnamization process the US made two decisions that lowered the odds of its success. The first was the Nixon's Administration's decision speed up US troop withdrawals against the advice of US commanders. By withdrawing too quickly, the US shifted the balance of power in favor the communists and forced the RVNAF into roles it was ill prepared for. The RVNAF's shortcomings became obvious and caused a crisis in confidence, particularly from the view of certain US officials, from which it never really recovered. The second decision that hurt Vietnamization - maybe even dooming it - was to sign the Paris Peace Agreement. The US forced this issue and it put the RVNAF in an impossible situation by allowing the NVA to remain in South Vietnam.

After the Peace Agreement, the US failed to provide the support it had committed to during the Vietnamization process. Nixon's removal and the mood of the US public made Nixon's pledge to re-intervene worthless.

While all of these American decisions/mistakes lowered Vietnamization's chances for success, the South Vietnamese were also guilty of errors. President Thieu was too slow to make the leadership changes necessary to form an effective and professional armed forces. While Thieu saw the burden of democracy as having forced him to keep incompetent yet politically connected leaders in power, he should have utilized his very best leaders, regardless of their affiliations, and risked the political fallout. Thieu also erred during the incursion into Laos when the NVA massed for a decisive battle to protect the Ho Chi Minh trail. Rather than ordering a withdrawal, he should have accepted the challenge. With US air and artillery support, the RVNAF may have been able to inflict a defeat that would have set the NVA back for a decade. Perhaps with the extra time the Vietnamization process could have succeeded. Thieu's final error was his insistence the RVNAF hold all the territory in South Vietnam. Thinking he would be involved in guerilla war or counting on US intervention if the NVA attacked, Thieu over-extended his forces and made

them vulnerable to being overwhelmed piecemeal. It was too late when he tried to form his troops into a more realistic perimeter.

All of the mistakes listed had negative impacts on Vietnamization. What if these mistakes had been had been rectified? Could the process have succeeded? Was it a realistic policy or was it an attempt to get out of an unpopular war?

Analysis.

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreement marked the end of the Vietnamization process; ready or not, the South Vietnamese were on their own. Was Vietnamization a sound policy by design? The US had inherited from France a small ARVN numbering about 200,000 poorly equipped men formed into Brigade sized units.¹¹⁴ In less than twenty years the US had expanded the RVNAF to over million men, a 500% manpower increase, organized into a modern fighting force.¹¹⁵ The fighting ability of the RVNAF had certainly improved with the large build up of military forces, the influx of military equipment and the expansion of military training. The RVNAF's great expansion, however, strained the already shallow pool of available leadership. A million-plus man RVNAF also placed a tremendous strain on a South Vietnamese population of 16 million.¹¹⁶ The need for educated and trained mechanics and technicians to support the modern force caused additional problems within the agricultural society. It was too much to ask a nation to expand its military by so much in such a short time and not face such challenges. Still, improvement was being made within the RVNAF up to the point US cut its support. A new generation of professional and experienced military leaders, trained by the US, were developing and slowly rising through the ranks. Many ARVN Division Commanders noted the increased professionalism in their staffs in the early 1970s as

¹¹⁴ Hinh, interview.

¹¹⁵ Figures computed by author from previously cited material.

¹¹⁶ Harvey H. Smith, Donald W. Bernier, Fredrica M. Bunge, Frances C. Ritz, Rinn-Supp Shin and Suzanne Teleki, Area Handbook for South Vietnam (Wash D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967) 59.

compared to the 1960s.¹¹⁷ These men could have risen to be the next generation of Division and Corps Commanders and may have been able to turn the tide if supported. The RVNAF also showed improvement in its ability to handle its combat service support and fire support responsibilities with increasing efficiency. Had the RVNAF been given more time under the US' protection, success may have been possible. As it was, the RVNAF was not given the time and was placed in an impossible situation by the Paris Peace Agreement.

Clearly, the South Vietnamese could not have supported a military structure of over one million - designed to counter a combined NVA/VC threat - indefinitely. For Vietnamization to have been successful in the long term it would have required a peace treaty which ensured a withdraw of the NVA forces from South Vietnam. It would have also required the US to provide the level of funding necessary to finance the programs planned under the CRIMP. The US would have had to be willing to act on its promises to forcefully retaliate against North Vietnamese violations. Had these three requirements been met in their total, Vietnamization could have succeeded and the RVNAF could have been reduced to level sustainable by its population and economy. Political issues in the US made these considerations irrelevant and Vietnamization was doomed to failure within the time frame it was executed.

The growing strength of the NVA, coupled with the single-minded determination of the North Vietnamese leaders, also make it obvious that Vietnamization could have never succeeded under the conditions it was implemented under. The NVA was being modernized during the period after the American withdraw; receiving tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft weapons and ammunition at increased rates over previous years. NVA manpower increased each year as 200,000 new young men came of draft age in North Vietnam; a figure that South Vietnam could never match.¹¹⁸ With their well established infiltration routes and supply caches in Cambodia and Laos, and their

¹¹⁷ Hinh, interview.

¹¹⁸ Herring, 171.

infrastructure within South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese would always own the initiative in the conflict. As Carl Von Clausewitz noted in book *On War*, "if one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other refrains, the first shall have the upper hand." Unrestrained by public opinion and with support from communist countries increasing, it is hard to imagine the North Vietnamese being held off indefinitely under the conditions set by the cease-fire and with US support for the RVNAF diminishing.

What if the US had honored Nixon's pledge to retaliate against North Vietnamese treaty violations while failing to address the other shortcomings of Vietnamization? Could the NVA have been stopped with bombing in 1975? In light of the research, it is the author's opinion that with US intervention the South Vietnamese would have held. B52 strikes on the massed NVA forces would have taken a devastating toll and would have put more fight into the RVNAF. It would have taken a major air effort and improved NVA AA defenses would have extracted a heavy price in terms of US planes and pilots, but it would have worked. What an air campaign could not do was retake any territory lost to the NVA. That would have been up to the RVNAF and it is unlikely they would have been able to recapture all of their land. After the Easter Offensive, the RVNAF did manage to reverse NVA gains in many areas but was unable to take it all back. In the author's opinion the same thing would have happened in 1975 with the NVA retaining large areas of captured territory. From these newly captured territories would come new attacks, and South Vietnam would be slowly eaten up. The US' temporary re-intervention, and that's the best South Vietnam could expect, would have only prolonged the inevitable. Just as air US strikes alone couldn't beat the North Vietnamese in 1965, they alone would not have had a lasting impact in 1975. The threat and use of air strikes needed to be part of comprehensive strategy for success; one that involved a just peace with an NVA withdrawal and the proper funding of the programs designed to make Vietnamization legitimate.

The long term survival of South Vietnam required Vietnamization to succeed. Vietnamization was mortally wounded by the combination of the Paris Peace Agreement, a lack of funding, and by the US' lack of resolve in honoring its pledge to re-intervene. The failure of Vietnamization, taken as a whole, was more than the foreign policy disaster it appeared to be. It marked the betrayal of people who had come to trust and rely on the US, and it marked a dark day in the history of both nations.

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