

Part III: America's Vietnam Ordeal—1965-1975

From the summer of 1965 to the beginning of 1968, the Vietnam War became America's War. U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam steadily increased, peaking at 536,100 men in early 1968. The bombing campaign against North Vietnamese and Vietcong bases and supply routes in the south intensified.

By late 1967, General William Westmoreland, the chief of U.S. military operations in Vietnam, predicted that the forces of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army would soon buckle under the growing military pressure. "I have never been more encouraged

in my four years in Vietnam," Westmoreland told American reporters.

Less than three months after Westmoreland's optimistic forecast, the Vietcong launched a large-scale attack against cities throughout South Vietnam. What came to be known as the Tet offensive (named for the Vietnamese New Year, or Tet) produced the heaviest fighting of the war. In Saigon, a Vietcong unit briefly held the compound of the U.S. embassy. In the northern city of Hue, communist forces drove the South Vietnamese army out of the city center.

March 1968—Seeds of Doubt

By late February 1968, U.S. forces had reversed most of the Vietcong's military gains. Politically and psychologically, however, the Tet offensive had delivered a serious blow to the American war effort. Although President Johnson publicly tried to minimize the significance of the attack, privately he and other top U.S. officials were stunned. They had believed army assessments that the communists were nearing the breaking point. Suddenly, they were faced with the prospect of a longer, bloodier war.

The Tet offensive marked a turning point in the Vietnam War. After February 1968, the United States began to retreat gradually from the policy set in the summer of 1965. In this part of the reading, you will follow the course of U.S. involvement from the aftermath of the Tet offensive to the peace agreement of January 1973 that brought an end to American military operations. As you will see, the reading revolves around four key documents from the period. For homework, quickly skim the documents. You will review them more thoroughly in class.

The Tet offensive forced General Westmoreland to recognize that the United States would have to increase its military presence in Vietnam to overcome the communists. In late February 1968, he called on President Johnson

to send 206,000 more troops to Vietnam. The request deepened Johnson's quandary. The president was hesitant to overrule Westmoreland in military matters. At the same time, he realized that the troop build-up would spark wider opposition at home to the war and damage his chances for re-election.

Johnson asked his new defense secretary, Clark Clifford, to guide him in the decision-making process. He called on Clifford to prepare an "A to Z reassessment" of U.S. policy in Vietnam within a week.

Clifford found that his task required him to perform a balancing act of his own. On the one hand, the military wanted to press ahead with its plan to drive the Vietcong out of the South Vietnamese countryside. On the other hand, civilian analysts in the Defense Department's International Security Affairs section cast doubt on hopes to defeat the communists militarily and instead proposed that U.S. forces pull back to protect the coastal cities of South Vietnam. Both sides agreed that the communists could not be stopped unless the South Vietnamese government did more to win the support of its people.

The memorandum Clifford submitted to the president on March 4, 1968 represented a compromise between the two contrasting viewpoints. It recommended taking the first

step toward Westmoreland's requested troop build-up, but proposed a more extensive study before going further. In the appendix of the memorandum, Clifford included the pessimistic evaluation of the International Security Affairs section.

Clifford's memorandum did not resolve Johnson's quandary. Rather, the president continued to waver. If anything, the memorandum planted additional seeds of doubt over U.S. policy in Vietnam.

In late March, Johnson brought together a group of fourteen veteran advisers to assess the war. The group, known as the "wise men," included a former secretary of state and

prominent retired generals. At their meeting, most of the group's members concluded that the United States should find a way out of Vietnam. Many conceded that the events of the preceding weeks had changed their minds about the war.

Reluctantly, Johnson accepted their advice. On March 31, 1968, he announced that he would halt U.S. bombing over most of North Vietnam and called for peace negotiations to begin. Johnson also declared that he would not run for re-election. In the following document, identify the passages that may have changed the president's thinking toward the Vietnam War.

Document #1—Memorandum to President Lyndon Johnson March 4, 1968, prepared by Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford

[Recommendations to the president regarding General Westmoreland's request for additional troops.]

1. An immediate decision to deploy to Vietnam an estimated total of twenty-two thousand additional personnel (approximately 60 percent of which would be combat). An immediate decision to deploy the three tactical fighter squadrons from Program 3 (about one thousand men)....
2. Either through Ambassador [to South Vietnam] Bunker or through an early visit by Secretary [of Defense] Clifford, a highly forceful approach to the GVN [government of South Vietnam] ([President] Thieu and [Vice-President] Ky) to get certain key commitments for improvement, tied to our own increased effort and to increased U.S. support for the ARVN [army of the Republic of South Vietnam]....
3. Early approval of a [armed forces] reserve call-up and an increased end strength adequate to meet the balance of the Westmoreland request and to restore a strategic reserve in the United States, adequate for possible contingencies world-wide....
4. Reservation [delay] of the decision to meet the [General] Westmoreland request in full. While we would be putting ourselves in a position to make these additional deployments, the future decision to do so would be contingent upon:
 - a. Reexamination on a week-by-week basis of the desirability of further deployments as the situation develops;
 - b. Improved political performance by the GVN [government of South Vietnam] and increased contribution in effective military action by the ARVN [army of the Republic of South Vietnam];
 - c. The results of a study in depth, to be initiated immediately, of possible new political and strategic guidance for the conduct of U.S. operations in South Vietnam, and of our Vietnamese policy in the context of our world-wide politico-military strategy....

[Assessment of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam, included in an appendix of the memorandum.]

There can be no assurance that this very substantial additional deployment [requested by General Westmoreland] would leave us a year from today in any more favorable military position. All that can be said is that the additional troops would enable us to kill more of the enemy and would

provide more security if the enemy does not offset them by lesser reinforcements of his own. There is no indication that they would bring about a quick solution in Vietnam and, in the absence of better performance by the GVN [government of South Vietnam] and the ARVN [army of the Republic of South Vietnam], the increased destruction and increased Americanization of the war could, in fact, be counter-productive....

[No matter what the result in Vietnam, we will have failed in our purpose if]:

- a. The war in Vietnam spreads to the point where it is a major conflict leading to direct military confrontation with the U.S.S.R. [Soviet Union] and/or China;
- b. The war in Vietnam spreads to the point where we are so committed in resources that our other world-wide commitments—especially NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization]—are no longer credible;
- c. The attitudes of the American people towards “more Vietnams” are such that our other commitments are brought into question as a matter of U.S. will;
- d. Other countries no longer wish the U.S. commitment for fear of the consequences to themselves as a battlefield between the East and the West....

Under these circumstances, we should give intensive study to the development of new strategic guidance to General Westmoreland. This study may show that he should not be expected either to destroy the enemy forces or to rout them completely from South Vietnam. The kind of American commitment that might be required to achieve these military objectives cannot even be estimated. There is no reason to believe that it could be done by an additional two hundred thousand American troops or double or triple that quantity....

The exact nature of the strategic guidance which should be adopted cannot now be predicted. It should be the subject of a detailed interagency study over the next several weeks....

November 1969: Vietnamization of America's War

By the time President Richard Nixon took office in January 1969, more than thirty thousand Americans had died in Vietnam. In 1968, Nixon had won a narrow victory over Johnson's vice-president, Hubert Humphrey, in part on the appeal of his pledge to end the Vietnam War.

Nixon hoped to find a middle way out of Vietnam. He rejected plans to pursue a military victory relentlessly. At the same time, he opposed calls for a settlement “that would amount to a disguised American defeat.” In the war zones of South Vietnam, communist forces were quick to test Nixon's resolve. In the spring of 1969, they launched a string of fierce attacks. Before the year was over, nearly ten thousand Americans would die in the fighting.

Nixon's main initiative focused on gradually turning the war effort over to the South Vietnamese army. The president called his

program “Vietnamization.” In July 1969, he withdrew twenty-five thousand American soldiers—the first cut in U.S. troop strength since the start of the conflict.

While Vietnamization won public support, the anti-war movement nonetheless gained momentum. In October 1969, protestors held large, well-organized anti-war demonstrations in several major cities. In Washington D.C., 250,000 protesters called for an immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

Nixon resented the anti-war movement. He argued that the protests undermined the U.S. position in Vietnam. To bolster public support for his strategy, Nixon frequently addressed the country over national television. During his first term as president, the speeches generally improved Nixon's standing among the American people. In the following document, identify the main elements of Nixon's policy in Vietnam.

Document #2—Speech by President Richard Nixon November 3, 1969, delivered over national television

...The question facing us today is—now that we are in the war, what is the best way to end it? In January [1969], I could only conclude that the precipitate [sudden] withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam would be a disaster not only for South Vietnam but for the United States and for the cause of peace.

For the South Vietnamese, our precipitate withdrawal would inevitably allow the Communists to repeat the massacres which followed their takeover in the North fifteen years before. They then murdered more than fifty thousand people and hundreds of thousands more died in slave labor camps....

For the United States, this first defeat in our nation's history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership not only in Asia but throughout the world....

In 1963, President Kennedy with his characteristic eloquence and clarity said we want to see a stable government there [in South Vietnam], carrying on the struggle to maintain its national independence.

We believe strongly in that. We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but Southeast Asia. So we're going to stay there....

A nation cannot remain great if it betrays its allies and lets down its friends. Our defeat and humiliation in South Vietnam without question would promote recklessness in the councils of those great powers who have not yet abandoned their goals of world conquest.

This would spark violence wherever our commitments help maintain the peace—in the Middle East, in Berlin, eventually even in the Western Hemisphere. Ultimately, this would cost us more lives. It would not bring peace. It would bring more war....

At the Paris peace conference [former] Ambassador [to South Vietnam] Lodge has demonstrated our flexibility and good faith in forty public meetings. Hanoi has refused even to discuss our proposals. They demand our unconditional acceptance of their terms which are that we withdraw all American forces immediately and unconditionally and that we overthrow the government of South Vietnam as we leave....

At the time we launched our search for peace, I recognized we might not succeed in bringing an end to the war through negotiation. I therefore put into effect another plan to bring peace—a plan which will bring the war to an end regardless of what happens on the negotiating front....

Let me briefly explain what has been described as the Nixon Doctrine—a policy which not only will help end the war in Vietnam but which is an essential element of our program to prevent future Vietnams....

We shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense....

In the previous [Johnson] administration, we Americanized the war in Vietnam. In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace.... Under the new orders, the primary mission of our troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam....

After five years of Americans going into Vietnam we are finally bringing American men home.... The South Vietnamese have continued to gain strength. As a result, they have been able to take over combat responsibilities from our American troops.... United States casualties have declined during the last two months to the lowest point in three years.

Let me now turn to our program for the future. We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all United States combat ground forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable....

As I've indicated on several occasions, the rate of withdrawal will depend on developments on three fronts. One of these is the progress which can be, or might be, made in the Paris talks....

The other two factors on which we will base our withdrawal decisions are the level of enemy activity and the progress of the training programs of the South Vietnamese forces....

My fellow Americans, I am sure you can recognize from what I have said that we really have only two choices open to us if we want to end this war. I can order an immediate precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without regard to the effects of that action. Or we can persist in our search for a just peace through a negotiated settlement, if possible, or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization, if necessary....

I have chosen this second course. It is not the easy way. It is the right way. It is a plan which will end the war and serve the cause of peace, not just in Vietnam but in the Pacific and the world....

April 1971—Light at the End of the Tunnel

Like Johnson, Nixon found that there was no easy way out of Vietnam. In his first two years in office, he cut U.S. troop strength in Vietnam nearly in half and sharply reduced casualties. To maintain America's military weight, he relied heavily on air attacks. Nixon, however, made little progress in achieving his broader policy goals. The South Vietnamese government remained unpopular and corrupt, while its army proved incapable of defending the country against the communists. In early 1971, the South Vietnamese army suffered a serious defeat in its first large-scale military operation. In a drive to destroy communist supply bases in Laos, the South Vietnamese crumbled under communist counter-attacks. (In 1970, Congress had prohibited U.S. ground troops from entering Laos or Cambodia.)

North Vietnamese leaders added to Nixon's predicament. They repeatedly rejected

Nixon's call for a simultaneous withdrawal of U.S. and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Instead, they held firm to their demand that the Vietcong be given a role in a new coalition government in South Vietnam. Negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam—both at the public level and in secret sessions—went nowhere.

Despite setbacks to his strategy, Nixon felt compelled to continue withdrawing American troops. Even as the U.S. presence in Vietnam shrank, protests against the war grew louder. By 1971, many of Nixon's staunchest supporters were urging the president to push for a quick end to the war. In the following document, identify the arguments Nixon presented to justify his declaration that "Vietnamization has succeeded."

Document #3—Speech by President Richard Nixon April 7, 1971, delivered over national television

...I am glad to be able to begin my report tonight by announcing that I have decided to increase the rate of American troops withdrawals for the period from May 1 to December 1 [1971]....

By the first of next month, May 1, we will have brought home more than 265,000 Americans—almost half of the troops in Vietnam when I took office.... Casualties were five times as great in the first three months of 1969 as they were in the first three months this year, 1971....

Let me review now two decisions I have made which have contributed to the achievements of our goals in Vietnam.... The first was the destruction of enemy bases in Cambodia.... American troops were out of Cambodia in sixty days, just as I pledged they would be. American casualties did not rise; they were cut in half. American troop withdrawals were not halted or delayed; they continued at an accelerated pace.

Now let me turn to the Laotian operation. As you know, this was undertaken by South Vietnamese ground forces with American air support against North Vietnamese troops which had been using Laotian territory for six years to attack American forces and allied forces in South Vietnam....

Did the Laotian operation contribute to the goals we sought? I have just completed my assessment of that operation and here are my conclusions:

First, the South Vietnamese demonstrated that without American advisers they could fight effectively against the very best troops North Vietnam could put in the field.

Second, the South Vietnamese suffered heavy casualties, but by every conservative estimate, the casualties suffered by the enemy were far heavier.

Third, and most important, the disruption of enemy supply lines, the consumption of ammunition and arms in the battle, has been even more damaging to the capability of the North Vietnamese to sustain major offensives in South Vietnam than were the operations in Cambodia ten months ago.

Consequently, tonight I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded. Because of the increased strength of the South Vietnamese, because of the success of the Cambodian operation, because of the achievements of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos, I am announcing an increase in the rate of American withdrawals. Between May 1 and December 1 of this year, one hundred thousand more American troops will be brought home from South Vietnam....

As you can see from the progress we have made to date and by this announcement tonight, the American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end. The day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight. Our goal is a total American withdrawal from Vietnam. We can and we will reach that goal through our program of Vietnamization if necessary. But we would infinitely prefer to reach it even sooner—through negotiations....

Let me turn now to a proposal which at first glance has a great deal of popular appeal. If our goal is a total withdrawal of all our forces, why don't I announce a date now for ending our involvement?...

The issue very simply is this: Shall we leave Vietnam in a way that—by our own actions—consciously turns the country over to the Communists? Or shall we leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance to survive as a free people? My plan will end American involvement in a way that would provide that chance. And the other plan would end it precipitately and give victory to the Communists....

January 1973—The Final Chapter

Nixon emphasized the need to achieve “peace with honor” in Vietnam. For him, that meant reaching an agreement that recognized the independence of South Vietnam, at least on paper. The United States spent much of 1971 and 1972 devoted to pressuring North Vietnam to accept U.S. peace terms.

However, the tools at Nixon’s disposal were limited. The withdrawal of American soldiers from South Vietnam continued at a steady pace. By August 1972, the last ground troops had gone home. Meanwhile, communist forces advanced against the South Vietnamese army. Nixon turned increasingly to air power to gain leverage against Vietnam. In May 1972, he stepped up air strikes against North Vietnam and ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor.

As the 1972 presidential election neared, the Nixon administration pressed harder for a settlement. In October 1972, North Vietnamese negotiators dropped their demand that a new coalition government be formed in South Vietnam. Within a few weeks, leaders drafted the outlines of a peace treaty. Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security adviser, announced that “peace is at hand.”

Expectations of a peace treaty helped Nixon win a landslide victory in the November elections. Peace, however, proved more difficult to attain. South Vietnamese President Thieu strongly objected to the draft agreement, claiming that the treaty would pave the way for a communist takeover of his country. Kissinger raised Thieu’s objections with his North Vietnamese counterparts. In turn, the North Vietnamese sought changes in the settlement that would have allowed their troops to remain in South Vietnam.

To break the deadlock, Nixon launched in December 1972 the most intense bombing campaign of the war against North Vietnam. After twelve days of attacks and the loss of fifteen American B-52 bombers, the two sides returned to negotiations and agreed in large part to accept the draft treaty they had prepared in October 1972.

Ultimately, Thieu’s fears turned out to be well-founded. After the release of the last American prisoners of war (POWs) in April 1973, fighting in South Vietnam gradually increased. In early 1975, three hundred thousand North Vietnamese troops spearheaded a massive offensive. Within three months, they had overwhelmed the South Vietnamese army and were tightening the noose around Saigon.

Thieu again appealed to the United States for support, but by then his regime had few backers in Washington. Nixon had resigned in disgrace in August 1974 because of the Watergate scandal. The influence of top military officials had been tarnished by the Vietnam experience. After North Vietnam’s offensive, Congress turned down President Gerald Ford’s request for \$552 million in emergency military aid to South Vietnam.

In the end, the United States was forced to evacuate by helicopter the remaining American personnel in Saigon. On April 30, 1975, the last Americans lifted off from the roof of the U.S. embassy to close the final chapter in the United States’ involvement in Vietnam.

In the following document, identify the portions of the peace treaty that you believe raised the sharpest disagreements during negotiations between the U.S. and North Vietnam.

Document #4—Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, signed January 27, 1973, in Paris by representatives of the United States, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Vietcong

Chapter I

The Vietnamese People's Fundamental National Rights

Article 1: The United States and all other countries respect the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Viet-Nam as recognized by the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Vietnam.

Chapter II

Cessation of Hostilities—Withdrawal of Troops

Article 2: A cease-fire shall be observed throughout South Viet-Nam as of 2400 hours G.M.T., on January 27, 1973. At the same hour, the United States will stop all its military activities against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam [North Vietnam] by ground, air and naval forces....

Article 3: ...As soon as the cease-fire goes into effect:

- (a) The United States forces and those of the other foreign countries allied with the United States and the Republic of Viet-Nam shall remain in-place pending the implementation of the plan of troop withdrawal....
- (b) The armed forces of the two South Vietnamese parties [the Thieu government and the Vietcong] shall remain in-place....
- (c) The regular forces of all services and arms and the irregular forces of the parties in South Viet-Nam shall stop all offensive activities against each other and shall strictly abide by the following stipulations:
 - All acts of force on the ground, in the air, and on the sea shall be prohibited;
 - All hostile acts, terrorism and reprisals by both sides will be banned.

Article 4: The United States will not continue its military involvement or intervene in the internal affairs of South Viet-Nam.

Article 5: Within sixty days of the signing of this Agreement, there will be a total withdrawal from South Viet-Nam of troops, military advisers, and military personnel, including technical military personnel and military personnel associated with the pacification program, armaments, munitions, and war material of the United States and those of the other foreign countries mentioned in Article 3 (a)....

Article 6: The dismantlement of all military bases in South Viet-Nam of the United States and of the other foreign countries mentioned in Article 3 (a) shall be completed within sixty days of the signing of this Agreement.

Article 7: From the enforcement of the cease-fire to the formation of the government provided for in Article 9 (b) and 14 of this Agreement, the two South Vietnamese parties shall not accept the introduction of troops, military advisers, and military personnel including technical military personnel, armaments, munitions, and war material into South Viet-Nam....

Chapter III

The Return of Captured Military Personnel and Foreign Civilians, and Captured and Detained Vietnamese Civilian Personnel

Article 8: (a) The return of captured military personnel and foreign civilians of the parties shall be carried out simultaneously with and completed not later than the same day as the troop withdrawal mentioned in Article 5....

Chapter IV

The Exercise of the South Vietnamese People's Right to Self-Determination

Article 9: The Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam [North Vietnam] undertake to respect the following principles for the exercise of the South Vietnamese people's right to self-determination.

- (a) The South Vietnamese people's right to self-determination is sacred, inalienable, and shall be respected by all countries.
- (b) The South Vietnamese people shall decide themselves the political future of South Viet-Nam through genuinely free and democratic general elections under international supervision.
- (c) Foreign countries shall not impose any political tendency or personality on the South Vietnamese people.

Article 10: The two South Vietnamese parties undertake to respect the cease-fire and maintain peace in South Viet-Nam, settle all matters of contention through negotiations, and avoid all armed conflict....

Chapter V

The Reunification of Viet-Nam and the Relationship between North and South Viet-Nam

Article 15: The reunification of Viet-Nam shall be carried out step by step through peaceful means on the basis of discussions and agreements between North and South Viet-Nam, without coercion or annexation by either party, and without foreign interference. The time for reunification will be agreed upon by North and South Viet-Nam.

U.S. Forces in Vietnam

