

Chapter IV

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK:

THE VIETNAM WAR FROM 1968 TO 1975

Tet ended American hopes for victory in Vietnam. Militarily, the Offensive had exposed the U.S. inability to stop infiltration or destroy the enemy. Worse, politically it showed that the NLF remained popular throughout Vietnam while large numbers of mainstream Americans--those who got their opinions from Walter Cronkite--seemed ready to throw in the towel. American leaders recognized failure too and so began a strategy of “*Vietnamization*”--shifting the burden for warfare to the ARVN while continuing to support Saigon with huge amounts of material and money, but also withdrawing American soldiers to quiet the antiwar movement--in hopes of winding down the war.

But at the same time, new President Richard M. Nixon, who had won office promising to quickly bring “peace with honor,” contradictorily intensified the American air campaign and geographically expanded the conflict into Cambodia and Laos. Nixon’s strategy, as Dove Senator George McGovern later described it, amounted to maintaining the war while “changing the color of the corpses” from white to yellow. If Tet and the Gold Crisis had signalled a dramatic transformation of American power, then Nixon’s policies sent the message that the American empire was still alive and capable of inflicting great damage on its enemies. If Ho and the NLF were to win, it would be at a tremendous cost.

The Age of Nixon

Two years before the next scheduled presidential election, Democratic Senator Stuart Symington warned LBJ that “Nixon will murder us” in 1968. “He will become the biggest dove of all times,” the senator feared. “There has never been a man in American public life that could

turn so fast on a dime.”¹ In the course of five and one-half years in the White House, Nixon would repeatedly prove the accuracy of Symington’s earlier observation. As commander-in-chief, Nixon would act as peacemaker and then unleash more bombs, pose as madman and complain about unfair “liberal” media treatment, pledge to uphold American credibility and violate the Constitution. Meanwhile the war in Vietnam continued, while bloodlettings in Cambodia and Laos intensified as well. At home, paranoia over the antiwar movement led to the Watergate scandal. Fittingly, the war in Vietnam and Richard Nixon’s political career ended in the same period.

Nixon had campaigned in 1968 with, he said, a “secret plan” to end the war. At the same time, his associates were secretly talking with RVN President Nguyen Van Thieu to make sure that peace talks did not take place before the election and thereby hurt his chances. Thus Nixon won by a slim margin in November 1968 and the new president set out to extricate America from Vietnam. To do so, Nixon pursued several paths, including talks, terrorism, expanding the war and accelerating B-52 strikes. The centerpiece of American strategy, developed and conducted by the president and his Machiavellian National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, would be Vietnamization to wind down the war. But at the same time Nixon would not go gentle into the night, urging staffers to consider new options, even nuclear weapons, for Vietnam. As Kissinger put it, “I refuse to believe that a little fourth-rate power like North Vietnam does not have a breaking point.”²

Such arrogance would typify the Nixon-Kissinger approach to the war and so the United States, while trying to get out of Vietnam, built up the war as well. The United States increased the size of the ARVN to one million soldiers by 1970, and provided it with a million M-16 rifles, 12,000 M-60 machine guns, 40,000 M-79 grenade launchers, and 2,000 heavy mortars and

howitzers. Nixon also began “Operation Phoenix,” which would “neutralize”--arrest or kill--suspected VC supporters in the south. Phoenix, according to one reporter, was a program of “calculated brutality,” in which innocent villagers were systematically arrested, tortured, or killed to meet quotas. As one CIA official described it, Phoenix was “thought up by geniuses and implementd by idiots.”³ It did, however, damage the VC infrastructrue in the south; by arresting and killing so many villagers, Phoenix operatives were bound to bag a large number of the enemy as well. Though arming the ARVN and “neutralizing” the enemy were important, the keystone of the “Nixon Doctrine” became the unbridled use of American technology, especially air power, against not only the VC, but all of Indochina. Vietnamization, intended to end the war, was expanding it.

Sideshows

The United States had been involved in Laos and Cambodia well before the Nixon years, but they became central battlegrounds after 1969. In Laos, America had fueled a “secret war” against the Pathet Lao rebels from the mid-1950s onward, while using CIA aircraft--the infamous Air America--to transship heroin out of the region. In Cambodia, the United States helped oust the neutral government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, invaded the country, unleashed a torrent of B-52 bombings, and helped facilitate the emergence of the bloody Khmer Rouge regime.

Between 1964 and 1969, the Johnson administration began flying sorties over Laos with B-52s, long-range bombers which carried eighty-four 500-pound, and twenty-four 750- pound bombs, and which could saturate an area of two square miles per sortie. In five years, American B-52 pilots dropped nearly 150,000 *tons* of bombs over the Plain of Jars, a Pathet Lao area in northeastern Laos. As a United Nations representative described it, “the intensity of the bombing was such that no organized life was possible in the villages.”⁴ Such destruction notwithstanding,

Nixon took even more drastic action. Both to show that the ARVN was capable of fighting by itself--per the doctrine of Vietnamization--and to convince the enemy that he might be a “madman” capable of inflicting untold damage on them, Nixon ordered an invasion of Laos in February 1971. The operation, known as Lam Son 719, or Dewey Canyon, was a disaster. The ARVN was supposed to attack the northern section of the VC’s supply route, the Ho Chi Minh Trail; strike the PAVN’s, troop encampments and supply depots; and disrupt the enemy’s offensive plans. But RVN President Thieu had given his commanders orders not to sustain too many casualties, and ARVN intelligence was terrible, so about 40,000 PAVN troops ambushed the southern army, inflicting casualty rates of over 50 percent and destroying or damaging 543 of 659 U.S. helicopters flying support missions. Only by dropping 48,000 tons of bombs did the United States prevent an even more horrific rout. The Laos invasion, intended to show the virtues of Vietnamization, instead proved that the southern state and the ARVN could only exist with massive U.S. support. As one American soldier put it in blunt terms, “the enemy was a tough, hard, dedicated fucking guy, and the ARVN didn’t want to hear about fighting. It was LaLa Land. Every, every, every, *every* firefight that we got into, the ARVN broke, the ARVN fucking ran.”⁵ Kissinger himself conceded that “as for the South Vietnamese, Laos exposed many of their lingering deficiencies.” ARVN planning was “largely abstract” and Kissinger doubted if it “every really understood what we were trying to accomplish.” Because of the failure of the Laos invasion, it was likely that the United States would face “another major military challenge” in the coming years.⁶

A Pitiful Helpless Giant

Even more than the Laotian intervention, U.S. involvement in Cambodia had an enormous impact on events in Indochina and at home. Nixon had become increasingly frustrated

with Prince Sihanouk, who, though technically neutral, was not preventing the VC from receiving supplies via his territory, including the port of Sihanoukville, and seeking refuge there from American troops. Accordingly, in March 1969, the president began Operation Menu--with raids codenamed Breakfast, Lunch, Snack, and Dinner--a series of "secret" bombings of Cambodia (secret to the American people but not to the Cambodians being struck by them) in which tens of thousands of sorties and hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs would be dropped on the small country. But Nixon still was not satisfied, so, in March 1970, the United States helped a palindromic Cambodian politician named Lon Nol overthrow Sihanouk. As one of his first acts, Lon Nol "invited" the southern Vietnamese to enter Cambodia to expel VC and PAVN forces from its territory.

Nixon, claiming that the "nerve center" of the enemy operations--the VC's pentagon, as it were--was in Cambodia, thus authorized an invasion, or "incursion" as he termed it, in late April, ironically just a week after announcing the withdrawal of another 150,000 U.S. troops from Indochina. To Nixon, the Cambodian invasion would show the world that he was tough, if not mad, and that American credibility remained strong. As the president explained in a televised address on 30 April, "if when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."⁷ Meanwhile the air war continued, with U.S. pilots flying over 8,000 sorties between July 1970 and February 1971, over 300 a day. All of Cambodia had essentially become a free-fire zone, but, as in Laos, with little effect on the war. In both Cambodia and the United States, however, the events of April 1970 made a huge and long-lasting impact.

In Cambodia, a Communist rebel group, the *Khmer Rouge*, which had been previously

marginal, exploited the U.S.-caused terror to gain a much larger following and, after the Lon Nol coup, joined an alliance with Sihanouk, thereby giving it credibility. Building on the revulsion against the United States and Lon Nol, the Khmer Rouge grew and took control of more area throughout the early 1970s, culminating in victory in April 1975. In power, the regime, led by Pol Pot, instituted the infamous “killing fields” in which the Khmer Rouge eliminated perhaps over a million Cambodians, by starvation and also by execution, often for spurious reasons like speaking French, wearing eyeglasses, or being “enemies” of the people. The Cambodian people, in less than a decade, had to deal with the twin terrors of the U.S. air war and the Khmer Rouge genocide.

The War Comes Home

At the same time, the movement against the war at home became the target of state violence, and Nixon anticipated this. As he prepared his “pitiful helpless giant” soliloquy, he warned his daughter Julie, a graduating senior at Smith, that “it’s possible that the campuses are really going to blow up after this speech.”⁸ And they did. Although public opinion polls showed support for the invasion, colleges and universities nationwide erupted in protest. Students at over 1,300 campuses held demonstrations; 536 campuses were shut down completely with 51 closing for the remainder of the academic semester. In California, the nation’s largest public system, Governor Ronald Reagan shut down the entire state university structure, while the Pennsylvania university system ceased operations indefinitely.

At Kent State University, a working-class school in northeastern Ohio, the war came home more starkly than ever. Students there began organizing demonstrations right after Nixon’s “incursion” speech and on May 2d torched the campus ROTC building, a frequent target of antiwar protest on most campuses. Ohio’s Governor, James Rhodes, comparing the students

to Nazis, Communists, and Klansmen, deployed the National Guard to the campus. On 4 May, after students, standing hundreds of yards away, threw rocks and bottles at the Reservists, several soldiers opened fire, killing 4 and wounding 13 others. Nixon, who days earlier had called young protestors “bums . . . blowin’ up the campuses,” offered no sympathy to the Kent victims. Vice-President Spiro Agnew in fact found the killings “predictable” and said that campus demonstrators were part of the “psychotic and criminal elements in our society.” J. Edgar Hoover, zealous FBI director and the Dennis Rodman of his day, told White House officials that one of the young women killed “was nothing more than a whore anyway.”⁹

The events at Kent State galvanized America’s youth. With almost no planning, a rally held on 9 May in Washington drew over 100,000 protestors. Nixon, trying to show his rapport with young people, went to the Lincoln Memorial to meet with demonstrators. Instead of discussing the war, however, he talked about football. “He just kept rambling,” one student said, “and he didn’t make any sense.”¹⁰ Nor did he do much to bring calm to the country. Amid the climate of anger and frustration, protests and violence continued. At Jackson State University, a historically-black institution in Mississippi, state police and national guardsmen attacked a dormitory and killed two students. By mid-1970 then, the United States was in a wider war in Cambodia, helping to unleash the Khmer Rouge, and using violence against students at home. “Peace with honor” seemed as far away as ever.

Talking . . .

Despite constant rhetoric about its desire for peace in Vietnam, the Johnson and Nixon administrations made no sincere effort to negotiate an end to the war in the 1960s. American offers to talk with Ho repeatedly included the requirement that the NLF *not* be a participant in any negotiations, a provision that southern nationalists and Hanoi were sure to reject. On the rare

occasion when negotiations seemed to hold promise, things quickly fell apart--as when Nixon and Kissinger torpedoed talks just prior to the 1968 elections. But in February 1970, without even informing Secretary of State William Rogers, Kissinger opened secret negotiations in Paris with Le Duc Tho, the DRVN representative. On the major issues, however--a bombing halt, a political role for the NLF, and American support for the RVN--the United States and Vietnam remained far apart, and in June, to protest the Cambodian invasion, Le Duc Tho suspended the secret talks. Negotiations reopened in May 1971, and in July, to gain the diplomatic initiative, Hanoi and the southern-based Provisional Revolutionary Government [PRG], the successor organization to the NLF, announced their own peace proposal, which included a coalition government in the south, the withdrawal of American troops, and the return of Prisoners of War [POWs] from all sides. To Hanoi, it was essential to hold reasonably free elections in the south, which it assumed would bring to power a government in the RVN willing to negotiate an end to the war. Kissinger must have expected that as well, for instead of considering the proposal he told the media that the DRVN was demanding the "overthrow" of Thieu and that the United States would never submit to such ultimatums. Free elections in the south, Kissinger warned, were a source of "turmoil and uncertainty."¹¹

. . . and Fighting

With such an approach to negotiations, the war was bound to continue--and it did, reaching new intensity in 1972. Nixon had actually increased his options in Vietnam in 1972 by pursuing a policy of detente with the major Communist powers, the Soviet Union and China, even travelling to the PRC in early 1972. Thus, by midyear, he could escalate the air war without the same fear of Soviet or Chinese retaliation that had influenced LBJ's air campaign. The immediate cause of the new B-52 strikes came with the enemy's so-called Easter Offensive.

On 30 March 1972, after months of construction and military preparations in the regions where Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos meet, three PAVN divisions, supported by artillery and T-54 tanks acquired from the Soviet Union, swept across the seventeenth parallel and into the northern RVN. Hanoi's goal was to again show the failure of Vietnamization and to demonstrate to Nixon that he faced endless war unless he talked with the enemy in good faith. The first goal was proven immediately, as the ARVN fell apart and the PAVN and VC captured various cities in the Demilitarized Zone [DMZ], as well as Quang Tri Province. Creighton Abrams, the American commander, feared that the southern Vietnamese "have lost their will to fight . . . and that the whole thing may well be lost."¹² The ARVN, with desertions nearing 20,000 a month and casualty figures approaching 150,000, was simply bolting as the PAVN-VC offensive roared into Kontum Province in the central highlands and had a clear path to Hué in the northeastern RVN. Even Hanoi was surprised by the speed of the offensives and hesitated before moving in for the kill.

In the meantime, Nixon rallied. He insisted that he would not negotiate under current conditions. "No nonsense. No niceness. No accommodations," he told Kissinger, and he unleashed a new series of air strikes that finally blunted the PAVN advance. Codenamed Operation *Linebacker*, the Air Force began non-stop B-52 attacks north of the seventeenth parallel in early April. Boasting that "the bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time,"¹³ Nixon had U.S. pilots conduct over 700 B-52 sorties in the DRVN, over 300 in or near Kontum over a three week period, and daily hit Quang Tri Province with 40 B-52 sorties, each carrying over 30 tons of bombs. Nixon even began bombing Hanoi and the port at Haiphong--where third-countries, including the Soviet Union, delivered supplies to the DRVN--and on 8 May mined the harbor at Haiphong. By that time, the Easter Offensive had run its

course. The B-52s had prevented a collapse in the RVN, but the damage already done was severe. In addition to the ARVN's losses and desertions, the attacks created about a million more refugees, the NLF remained in control of northern Quang Tri, and guerrilla forces had exploited the mayhem in the north by establishing positions all over the delta and central coast. Nonetheless, Linebacker continued for seven months, in which time the United States flew about 42,000 sorties and dropped over 155,000 tons of bombs on DRVN storage facilities, air bases, power plants, bridges, tunnels, hospitals, and homes. Despite the relentless barrage, American prospects in Vietnam were not markedly better than before, while at home the American people continued to oppose the war.

Vocal Opposition and the 'Silent Majority'

Because of Nixon's escalation, millions of Americans joined protests against the war. The nature of the Peace Movement and demonstrations against continued American involvement in Vietnam changed significantly, however. In October 1969, radical activists in SDS and a splinter group, the Weathermen, returned to Chicago, site of the 1968 police riots, to conduct their "days of rage," blowing up a statue dedicated to Chicago police and engaging in pitched battles with law enforcement officials. And barely six months later, following the Cambodian invasion, numerous campuses erupted, while in the summer of 1970 violence against draft boards and military installations was not uncommon. But the typical protest was not like Chicago or Kent State, though Nixon would try to depict it as such. Rather, leaders of the movement against the war tried to broaden demonstrations to include "mainstream" Americans--clergy, businessmen, housewives, high school students, and others--and to present a more moderate, though still firm and aggressive, opposition to the war.

Along those lines, in 1969, the National Moratorium Day, on 15 October, and the New

Mobilization to End the War, or “Mobe,” a month later, constituted probably the biggest actions against the war in the Vietnam era. Over a million Americans participated in the Moratorium: over 100,000 protestors met in Boston Common; in Manhattan, political leaders and Woody Allen, Shirley Maclaine, and Stacy Keach spoke against the war; in Washington, after speeches by Dr. Benjamin Spock and others, Coretta Scott King, Martin Luther King’s widow, led a candlelight march on the White House. Among supporters of the Moratorium were John Laird, son of Defense Secretary Melvin Laird; Antonia Lake, wife of Kissinger aide Tony Lake; Susan and Peter Haldeman, children of Nixon’s Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman; and the children of both Treasury Secretary George Shultz and Office of Management and Budget Director Caspar Weinberger; even Vice-President Spiro Agnew’s 14-year-old daughter wanted to participate-- more examples of the war literally coming home to the administration.

The Moratorium infuriated the White House. Pat Buchanan, a Nixon aide, wrote the president that the war “will now be won or lost on the American front.” The public was “confused and uncertain and beginning to believe that they may be wrong and beginning to feel themselves the moral inferiors of the candle carrying pessimists who want to get out now.” Nixon claimed that the protests were actually prolonging the war by sending the message to Hanoi that it would not have to compromise so long as the American people were demanding an end to the conflict. To rally support for the war, the president, while addressing the nation two weeks after the Moratorium, claimed that a “silent majority” of Americans in fact supported the war, but were not staging huge rallies to state their opinion, as the antiwar forces were.¹⁴

A month later, however, even more Americans vocally participated in the “Mobe,” thereby laying bare Nixon’s attempt to discredit them. On 13 November, the protestors began a “March Against Death,” hanging cards around their necks with the names of dead American

soldiers and pausing in front of the White House to announce the names of Americans killed in Vietnam. “For almost forty hours, through rain, hail, and bright sunlight, the death parade continued unabated. Forty-five thousand marched in all.”¹⁵ On the 15th, over a quarter-million people met on the Mall to demonstrate against the war, while in San Francisco, amid steady rains, another 150,000 turned out for the Mobe. Again the Nixon administration was reeling. To Attorney General John Mitchell, the Mobe evoked images of the Russian Revolution as the D.C. police unleashed tear gas against the protestors; he then, hopefully not seriously, turned to John Dean, buttoned down White House counsel, and said “Dean, you’re a revolutionary like those kids--what do they want?” Kissinger felt similarly, describing the actions as “fascism of the streets” in Washington.

The views of Mitchell and Kissinger were out of touch with most Americans, “silent” or otherwise. After Kent State, mainstream opposition to the war grew as even the establishment--senators and representatives, the media, the business community, and others--began to bail out on Vietnam. In mid-1970, Senators John Sherman Cooper [R, KY], a conservative, and Frank Church [D, ID], a liberal, successfully sponsored a bill to cut off funding for the war in Cambodia unless congress specifically approved the expense, and also repealed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the legislation that gave LBJ the go-ahead on the war in August 1964. In 1971 Senators George McGovern [D, SD] and Mark Hatfield [R, OR] tried to go even further, offering an amendment to cut off all funding for the war by the end of the year. Their effort failed, but in the meantime even more members of the clergy, military, press, and corporate community were speaking out against the war, especially after the July 1971 publication of the *Pentagon Papers*--a “secret” history of the war--leaked to the *New York Times* by Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg and highly revealing of the motives behind the war and the behavior of ranking officials.

Ironically, however, Nixon's continued withdrawal of American troops--he would pull out 70,000 by 1 May 1972, leaving just 69,000 in Vietnam--took the steam out of the antiwar movement. Although spontaneous protests broke out in numerous areas during the April Linebacker campaign and at the Republican convention in Miami in August, there were no more massive and dramatic demonstrations as there had been in the previous years. But Nixon was unable to understand his success and, in July 1972, burglars authorized by the White House, in an effort to discredit the Democrat's peace candidate, Senator McGovern, and the antiwar movement, broke into Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington--thereby setting into motion a chain of events that would lead to Nixon's resignation in disgrace in August 1974. In the end, the Peace Movement helped drive Nixon out of office, perhaps unwittingly, but, despite its fervent efforts, could not end the war at an earlier date.

Soldiers in Revolt

There is still today great debate over the impact of the antiwar movement, with many of those who protested the war claiming that they forced American policymakers to de-escalate the war in Vietnam, while many supporters of the war charge that the demonstrators were essentially traitors who gave aid and comfort to the enemy. Both views are problematical, and for the same reason: They place the focus of the war on the United States, whereas in reality the outcome was decided in Vietnam. The NLF was able to consistently appeal, politically and culturally, to the people of southern Vietnam, while the RVN government never overcame the label of a U.S. "puppet" regime. Militarily, the VC enjoyed the respect and/or fear of the southern populace, while the ARVN was riddled with desertions and corruption. And in the north, the people of the DRVN withstood the stunning barrage of B-52 attacks with their will unbroken, and the PAVN, as shown during the Lam Son 719 and Easter campaigns, was an organized and efficient military

machine.

Worse for the Americans, their own military establishment in Vietnam was deeply troubled and deteriorating as the the war was winding down. Problems of morale, discipline, drugs, racial conflict, and anti-war activity--already serious during the Johnson years--mushroomed in the early 1970s, leading to one of the more serious crises for the U.S. military in its history. American soldiers often lacked any incentive to fight in Vietnam, violating rules or ignoring their officers because, as they often said, "what are they going to do about it, send me to 'Nam?'" With such attitudes, American troops in Vietnam engaged in behavior that was often shocking.

The drug problem that was already in evidence became a crisis in the final years of the war. There was always a steady supply of cheap and potent drugs, especially marijuana and heroin, available to American soldiers in Vietnam, and they took advantage of the consumer's market in mind-altering substances. Marijuana in Vietnam had a particular kick to it, with THC levels of 5 percent, compared to 1 percent in the grass usually available in the United States; in addition, most dope in Vietnam was treated with opium, intensifying the high. Heroin was also widely available by 1969. It was 95 percent pure but incredibly cheap--where a vial in the United States might cost \$200.00, in Vietnam it would be a dollar or two. By 1973, the Pentagon admitted that about one-third of American troops were using heroin and about 20 percent were addicted at one time. According to a 1971 congressional survey, drugs in Vietnam were more plentiful than cigarettes or chewing gum. Indeed, the drug problem became so severe that on some bases, commanders would allow prostitutes into the barracks so that the soldiers could avoid the downtown brothels, where illicit substances were sold and bought so easily. For the soldiers, drugs were a way of coping with, or forgetting about the war.

By itself, the serious substance abuse problem in the armed forces was a huge barrier to effective military action. But the military also had many other serious problems in the Vietnam era. Given the nature of the war, one of the few ways for the United States to claim progress was to cite the impressive “body counts,” the number of enemy soldiers killed in combat, artillery attacks, or air strikes. In pursuit of high numbers, U.S. officers, to impress their superiors and get promotions, often wildly inflated the figures, coerced their men into battle, or had their troops engage in brutalities. There was thus a marked difference in the Vietnam experience of officers and the so-called grunts. Between 1965 and 1972, of the more than 27,000 Army personnel killed in Vietnam, only 3200 were officers, and of the 43,000 Americans with the rank of major or higher, only 201 died in Vietnam (mostly majors). Among frontline officers, most were ROTC products, but enrollment in that program at American schools dropped from 231,000 in 1965 to 73,000 seven years later.

Among soldiers in Vietnam, there was also a clear correlation between status and education and their chances of survival. Draftees were far likelier to get killed or wounded than enlisted men. Soldiers who had not graduated from High School had casualty rates three times higher than those who had a diploma, while young men whose families had incomes in the \$4-7,000 range were three times more likely to die or be hurt than those with incomes over \$17,000. African-American casualty rates were higher as well--25 percent of the U.S. total between 1965-1968 and 13 percent for the entire war, and the average combat rifle company was over 50 percent black and Hispanic. In addition, white soldiers from southern states, the poorest in the country, had much higher casualty rates than the norm. Not surprisingly, then, many soldiers resented their officers and rebelled accordingly. As Naval Lieutenant John Kerry, an antiwar activist, put it, “how do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”¹⁶ Thus “search

and evade” tactics were more common; fraggings grew dramatically, with some estimates that over 2000 fraggings were committed and about 100 U.S. officers killed; hundreds of thousands of soldiers received less-than-honorable discharges; and most importantly, organized dissent within the armed forces badly shook the military establishment.

Soldier’s opposition to the war could be subtle, such as listening to antiwar music at a GI Coffee House, or wearing a peace sign or the letters “F.T.A.” [“Fuck the Army”] on one’s helmet. Or resistance could be more overt, such as sailors aboard the *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk* refusing to sail for Vietnam and circulating an antiwar newspaper, *Kitty Litter*. On other Navy ships, sailors sabotaged the radar center and gears to avoid deployment to Indochina. In November 1972, one of the greatest mass mutinies in U.S. Naval history occurred, as 144 sailors refused to reboard the *U.S.S. Constellation* in Southern California and then laughed at the officers trying to round them up. Given such internal problems, it was no surprise that the respected military writer Colonel Robert Heinl, quoting the comic strip character *Pogo*, could only lament about the U.S. armed forces in Vietnam, “we have met the enemy, and he is us.”

Not surprisingly, organized antiwar groups within the military had a great impact, and among them the Vietnam Veterans Against the War was the most significant, especially in 1971. Up to that point, VVAW had organized and participated in antiwar actions--most notably a New Year’s Eve takeover of the Statue of Liberty--but considerably increased its activities amid the trial of William Laws Calley. Lieutenant Calley had been a young platoon leader in Charlie Company, attached to the Americal Division, operating in the village of *My Lai* in central Vietnam near the coast in March 1968, when he and his troops, under orders to destroy everything and everyone they encountered, massacred over 400 Vietnamese, including old men, women and babies but no VC, until an American helicopter pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Hugh

Thompson, threatened to open fire on Calley's men unless they ended the slaughter. For eighteen months, until another veteran, Ron Ridenhour, came forth to relate the story of "something rather dark and bloody," the story of My Lai remained unknown. Once revealed, the Army held Calley principally responsible and court-martialled him. VVAW, appalled at government claims that My Lai and Calley were unique, thus began its own "Winter Soldier Investigation" in January 1971, during which over 200 Americans who had served in Vietnam testified about atrocities that they had been involved in or seen. To the Winter Soldiers--whose name derived from Thomas Paine's pamphleteering about the "summer soldiers and the sunshine patriots" during the War for Independence--incidents like My Lai were part of official American doctrine, engendered by obsessive anti-Communism, free fire zones, and body counts. As a result, Marine Sargeant Scott Camil could offer "testimony involv[ing] burning of villages with civilians in them, the cutting off of ears, cutting off of heads, torturing of prisoners, calling in of artillery on villages for games, corpsmen killing wounded prisoners, napalm dropped on villages, women being raped, women and children being massacred . . . bodies shoved out of helicopters."¹⁷

The Winter Soldiers and VVAW attracted significant attention. One congressional committee considered them the third most dangerous subversive group in the country, behind the Weather Underground and the Black Panthers. On the other end of the spectrum, Senator Hatfield had the entire testimony placed in the *Congressional Record* to make Americans recognize the brutal nature of the war in Vietnam. For VVAW, it set the stage for *Dewey Canyon III*, its "limited incursion into the country of congress" in April 1971. *Dewey Canyon III* was one of the more powerful and memorable demonstrations of the Vietnam Era for it involved thousands of veterans, many whom had been decorated for their service in the war, coming to

Washington to renounce their behavior and demand an end to the fighting. Many veterans threw away their awards, including a Medal of Honor winner; veterans and Gold Star Mothers (women who had lost sons in the war) marched on Arlington Cemetery, where they were denied entry by military police; others staged guerrilla theater--wearing fatigues, carrying toy weapons and staging mock raids on "civilians." Politicians and celebrities visited the vets on the Mall, and in the Senate McGovern and Philip Hart [D, MI] conducted hearings on war atrocities. Most powerfully, John Kerry, who had won the Silver Star, Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts in Vietnam and is now a Massachusetts senator himself, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, emotionally ending

We wish that a merciful God could wipe away our own memories of that service [in Vietnam] as easily as this Administration has wiped away their memories of us. But all that they have done and all that they can do by this denial is to make more clear than ever our own determination to undertake one last mission--to search out and destroy the last vestige of this barbaric war, to pacify our own hearts, to conquer the hate and fear that have driven this country these last ten years and more, so when thirty years from now our brothers go down the street without a leg, without an arm, or a face, and small boys ask why, we will be able to say "Vietnam" and not mean a desert, not a filthy obscene memory, but mean instead the place where America finally turned and where soldiers like us helped it in the turning.¹⁸

Kerry's words, though powerful, were ultimately empty, for in Paris Kissinger was playing politics and in Vietnam Nixon was making war. As for Lieutenant Calley, he had become something of a folk hero to the political right, with Charlton Heston and other celebrities sponsoring a defense fund for him. After his conviction, Calley spent three days in military prison until Nixon released him into House Arrest; three years later he was paroled and now runs a pawn shop in Columbus, Georgia. In the village of My Lai, there are a number of memorials to the victims of the slaughter there.

Peace is at Hand

Amid the Linebacker bombings, both the DRVN and United States felt pressured to return to negotiations. In Hanoi, the leadership could no longer count on the same levels of support from the Soviet Union and China in the past. Nixon's det ente was working, as Moscow and Beijing both were urging Pham Von Dong, Ho's successor, to moderate the DRVN's demands. In America, continued congressional criticism and attempts to cut off funding for Vietnam made it clear to the White House that the war could not continue indefinitely. Though only 47,000 ground troops remained in Vietnam in mid-1972, the U.S. role was not diminishing, as air strikes, targeted against all of Indochina, were originating from the RVN, Thailand, Guam, and carriers in the South China Sea.

In July 1972, then, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho resumed their private talks in Paris. The United States was willing to back off its insistence that northern troops be withdrawn from the south--after all, if the U.S. military could not dislodge them, then they were not going to leave on their own. For its part, the DRVN backed down from its demand that that United States end support for the Thieu regime and replace it with a coalition that would include the PRG. On 8 October, Le Duc Tho offered Kissinger a nine-point proposal to end the war. In it, he rescinded calls for Thieu's removal and the establishment of a coalition government; was willing to accept a cease-fire prior to a political settlement; called for the removal of all "foreign" troops; and wanted to limit all military aid to the replacement of used supplies. Politically, Tho was willing to recognize two "administrative entities" in the south--the Thieu government and the PRG. Kissinger, eager for an agreement before the 7 November presidential elections, assented to the proposal, declaring to the world that "peace is at hand." If only Nixon and Thieu had agreed!

The southern Vietnamese had been left out of the negotiations between Kissinger and Le

Duc Tho, so Thieu immediately began to monkeywrench the process. In late October, the RVN leader listed 69 objections to the nine-point program. Thieu was enraged that northern troops would remain in the south and that the PRG was recognized as an institutional entity. He also issued “Four Nos” regarding any agreement: no recognition of the enemy; no neutralization in the south; no coalition government; and no surrender of territory. Kissinger was furious at Thieu and wanted Nixon to threaten to cut off all aid to the RVN unless its president fell in line with the deal. By that time, however, Nixon was quite sure that he would easily be re-elected, with or without a settlement in Vietnam, so he simply dismissed the agreement between Kissinger and Hanoi. In turn, Kissinger issued a new round of threats to the DRVN, promising more air strikes and breaking off talks, while also demanding to reopen the question of northern troops remaining in the south. In short order, Kissinger had double-crossed Thieu; Thieu had done the same to Nixon; Nixon then did it to Kissinger; and Kissinger to Le Duc Tho. Years earlier Bob Dylan had written that “to live outside the law you must be honest.” Apparently, Nixon and Kissinger had not been listening to *Blonde on Blonde*.

In both Saigon and Washington, there were immediate and catastrophic repercussions to the breakdown. In the RVN, Thieu began a series of large-scale arrests of so-called dissidents, detaining many without trial, and he began reclassifying political prisoners as “criminals” in order to exclude them from any Prisoner of War exchange or amnesty. In the United States, Nixon won a landslide reelection victory against George McGovern, though he still had not unveiled his “secret plan” to end the war from 1968. Kissinger, citing “nuances” and “technicalities,” was still blaming the DRVN for the failure of the October talks, and he described Hanoi’s representatives as “just a bunch of shits. Tawdry, filthy shits.”¹⁹ And the U.S. media just went along for the ride, creating the impression that the Vietnamese had disrupted the

peace process. Nixon, thus politically protected and emboldened, played “madman” once again and commenced Linebacker II, better known as the “*Christmas Bombings.*” Beginning on 18 December and lasting eleven days, the saturation bombing campaign “was a final and devastating evidence of Nixon’s willingness to unleash U.S. power.”²⁰ Fighter jets such as F-105s, F-4s, and F-111s and over 200 B-52 bombers flew round-the-clock missions for a week and a half against the DRVN in what Kissinger’s aide Roger Morris called “calculated barbarism.”²¹ Air Force tactical aircraft flew over 1000 sorties and B-52s another 750, and they dropped a combined total of over 40,000 tons of bombs, hitting not only military and communications facilities but also docks, shipyards, workplaces, residential areas, and the DRVN’s biggest hospital. In some places, the B-52s left craters with diameters of 50 feet. The northern Vietnamese had prepared for the raids in underground shelters and tunnels, and still lost 1600 civilians, which was not a significant number compared to other civilian deaths during the U.S. air war.

Linebacker II caused serious destruction in the DRVN, but at a great cost. North Vietnam, utilizing its own considerable antiaircraft capabilities--with over 1000 surface-to-air missiles--downed well over 20 tactical aircraft and 15 B-52s (though Hanoi claimed to have downed 34 and the U.S. Pentagon privately admitted to higher numbers), and also shot down 44 American pilots. Politically, Nixon’s air attacks were condemned across the globe, with the Vatican and European leaders speaking out against the bombings--Swedish Prime Minister Olaf Palme compared them to Nazi atrocities--and both the Soviet Union and China threatening to reconsider detente. Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev publicly blasted the “longest and dirtiest” war in U.S. history while Zhou Enlai and Mao’s wife attended a mass rally in Beijing in support of the PRG and its foreign minister, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh.²² At home, about two-thirds of U.S. senators polled opposed the Linebacker bombings and were threatening to jpull funding for

the war, while the president's approval rating, barely a month after his overwhelming reelection victory, fell to just 39 percent. Nixon would claim, in 1973 and repeatedly thereafter, that the Christmas bombings had forced Hanoi to accept the treaty that ended the war; in truth, the United States bombed itself into a final settlement. Linebacker II amounted to a terror bombing campaign, had little, if any, military purpose, and backfired politically. By January 1973, even Richard M. Nixon could see that the war in Vietnam had to end.

War Is Over (If You Want It)

On 20 January 1973, Nixon was again inaugurated as president in Washington D.C.; two days later his predecessor, LBJ, died on his ranch in Texas; the next day, the 23d, Nixon announced that an agreement to end the U.S. war on Vietnam had been reached in Paris and that a cease-fire would take effect on the 27th. These events, converging as they did, provided a fitting denouement to the Vietnam experience. "Lyndon Johnson's war" was now ending, though he had not known it, while Richard Nixon, like a tragic Greek figure, was heading inexorably to his downfall. In Vietnam, despite the peace agreement, the bleeding continued.

The final peace treaty was virtually identical to the October agreement and indeed followed many of the general lines of North Vietnamese proposals from 1969 onward. The accord established a "National Council of Reconciliation and Concord," with representation for the PRG; created a temporary DMZ; allowed northern personnel to remain in the south while U.S. troops would depart in full; and provided that all POWs be returned to their homelands. Nixon would claim that he had achieved "peace with honor," and Kissinger, along with Le Duc Tho, would receive the Nobel Peace Prize (which Tho refused), but the pact mainly reflected the fact that the United States could not end the revolution in southern Vietnam nor break the will of the north. To Nguyen Van Thieu, the recognition of the PRG and presence of northern troops

put his government in a precarious position, so Nixon had to demand that he sign the treaty and then confidentially promised him that America would continue to support the RVN. Hanoi, though compromising on its demand for Thieu's removal, continued to seek, as in 1954, national reunification. Nixon, to seal the deal, also secretly agreed to pay the DRVN \$3.5 billion in reparations, with no strings attached. Despite the agreement and secret codicils, the treaty accomplished nothing besides U.S. withdrawal. Critics such as ex-CIA officer Frank Snepp would later claim that American disengagement was Nixon's only goal anyway, that he wanted to remove U.S. forces to allow a "decent interval" before the RVN inevitably fell. Indeed, since Tet 1968, Americans had little realistic hope of "winning" in Vietnam--whatever that meant--but still unleashed a vicious and destructive war against the people of Vietnam on both sides of the seventeenth parallel. During the first Nixon administration, 1969-1973, over 15,000 Americans died in Vietnam, while over 100,000 southern Vietnamese and over 400,000 northern Vietnamese perished as well. Not content with that, the United States continued to wage war in Indochina even after the 1973 "peace" treaty.

Et Thieu?

The ink was barely dry on the peace accords when the violations began. After initialing the treaty, Thieu, confident of Nixon's continued support, told his troops that if "Communists come into your village, you should immediately shoot them in the head," while those who "begin talking in a Communist tone . . . should be immediately killed."²³ In March, Thieu established the *Dan Chu*, or "Democracy," Party and then, shades of Diem, forced all civil servants to join it, rigged national elections, banned rival parties, shut down the media, and established martial law. Contrary to the Paris agreement, the RVN president continued to reject any PRG role in southern politics. Militarily, the ARVN, because of American funding, could count on over 1,000,000

troops, much more than the north had, and a sizable Air Force as well, both of which were used against PRG zones and even against neutral members of the Joint Military Commission who were trying to map each sides' zones of control in the southern countryside.

Because northern troops remained in the south against his wishes, and other forces moved below the seventeenth parallel, Thieu felt no responsibility to maintain the peace pact and he still relied on Nixon to keep him in power in the RVN. And, for a time, U.S. money did continue to flow into Thieu's purse. Throughout 1973, however, Nixon's options were narrowing, as the Senate began to reduce funding for Vietnam and passed the War Powers Act to limit the president's ability to make war. More importantly, the Watergate crisis was engulfing the White House, pushing events in Indochina onto the back burner. In the RVN, meanwhile, the economy was in disarray--with inflation rates of 90 percent; Buddhist opposition to the government resurfaced; and the ARVN was still plagued by corruption and suffering heavy desertion rates. Because of refugees, the population of Saigon soared from 1,000,000 to 4,000,000, with serious housing shortages, a thriving black market, brothels everywhere, drugs, enemy infiltration, and con men making the situation even worse. Even with over \$3 billion in American aid in 1973-1974, the Thieu regime was losing its ability to control the RVN.

The Beat Goes On: Laos and Cambodia

The 1973 peace accords did not include the other states of Indochina so, along with continued fighting in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia remained in bloody conflict too. In Laos, where the United States had dropped a million or so tons of bombs prior to 1973, the American State Department had vowed to defend the Royalist government against Pathet Lao rebels and a U.S. skeleton crew remained there into 1974. In April of that year, however, the various factions in Laotian politics formed a coalition government and, despite American efforts to supply the

Royalists with weapons to use against the Pathet Lao, by early 1975 the Communist rebels clearly had the upper hand in the government and they assumed power in Laos later that year.

With regard to Cambodia, Kissinger announced in January 1973 that both Lon Nol and the United States would suspend attacks and bombings against the Khmer Rouge, but would take “necessary counter measures” if the rebels did not obey the cease-fire. The Khmer Rouge, however, did not trust Kissinger’s word, feared that their “allies” in North Vietnam would conquer Cambodia if they quit fighting, and were tempted by Lon Nol’s weaknesses to oust him sooner rather than later, so they continued their struggle against the American puppet government. Thus, on 9 February, Nixon and Kissinger reopened the American air war “with greater intensity than ever before,” as William Shawcross explained it. “Within a few months an enormous new aerial campaign had destroyed the old Cambodia forever.” Up to January 1973, the White House had justified its air war in Cambodia as a way to disrupt sanctuaries and infiltration by the northern Vietnamese. But now, after the peace treaty, those reasons were no longer valid, so Nixon publicly claimed that the new air strikes would protect the Lon Nol government from Communist attacks. In fact, the continued bombing was directly linked to U.S. promises of support to Thieu. With the Americans forbidden from attacking Vietnam by the peace pact, the Cambodian campaign was a way to keep U.S. power in Indochina to protect the RVN if need be--to serve as a “firehose” for Thieu. As the Director of Central Intelligence, William Colby, admitted, “Cambodia was then the only game in town.”²⁴

The impact of the air war after January 1973 was catastrophic. Cambodia was turned into a desolate “parking lot.” Whereas American B-52 pilots had dropped 37,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia in all of 1972, they dropped 24,000 tons in March 1973 alone, 35,000 tons in April, and another 36,000 tons in May, while fighter bombers were unleashing between 15,000 and

20,000 tons per month as well. At home, the U.S. Congress finally put its foot down and voted to end American air operations in Cambodia as of 15 August 1973, and it later included the “secret war” as an article of impeachment against Nixon. That charge was later dropped, prompting an exasperated Representative William Hungate [D, MO] to admit that “it’s kind of hard to live with yourself when you impeach a guy for tapping telephones and not for making war without authorization.”²⁵ Inside Cambodia, Khmer Rouge strength grew as the American attacks increased, and by 1974 they controlled 80 percent of the country while the Lon Nol regime was moribund. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge victoriously entered the capital of Phnom Penh and declared the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea.

In large measure, they emerged and triumphed *because of*, not *despite*, the massive U.S. air assault. As David Chandler, an eminent scholar of Cambodia, explained it, “the bombing destroyed a good deal of the fabric of pre-war Cambodian society and provided the [Khmer Rouge] with the psychological ingredients of a violent, vengeful and unrelenting social revolution. This was to be waged, in their words, by people with ‘empty hands.’ The party encouraged class warfare between the ‘base people,’ who had been bombed, and the ‘new people,’ who had taken refuge from the bombing, and thus had taken sides, in Khmer Rouge thinking, with the United States.”²⁶ Once in power, the Khmer Rouge were led by Pol Pot, who was impressed with the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and too wanted to eradicate all western influences in his country, while at the same time guarding against any possible intervention by his longtime enemies, the Vietnamese. Thus, he emptied out urban areas in the hopes of establishing a pure form of peasant communism. Calling his experiment “Year Zero,” to imply that Cambodia was beginning its history over again, the Khmer Rouge engaged in mass executions of hundreds of thousands of their own people, especially ethnic Chinese and

Vietnamese, Muslims, and Buddhists. Even more died of starvation due to Pol Pot's failed agrarian policies. Cambodia, a small country suffering from dire poverty to begin with, thus experienced, in barely a decade, two indescribable horrors: the American air war and the Khmer Rouge genocide, both linked together politically and historically.

The Enemy and the Burden of Protracted War

For the NLF, VC, and North Vietnamese, the period from Tet to ultimate victory was filled with trial, loss, and redemption. While most scholars, conservative and liberal alike, have argued that the NLF and VC were devastated by the early 1968 Tet Offensive, the enemy in fact was not irrecoverably hurt and recuperated rather quickly. But, as the respected scholar Ngo Vinh Long has shown, the VC came back for two "mini-Tets" later in 1968 instead of regrouping in their bases in the countryside to rebuild, and in those engagements they suffered much heavier losses. Along with the damage being done by the Phoenix program, the enemy, by 1969, was licking its wounds. Psychologically, Vietnam was rocked as well when, on 2 September 1969, Ho died of congestive heart failure. Millions of Vietnamese mourned their late leader and his successors--Pham Van Dong, Le Duan, and Vo Nguyen Giap--wept openly at his funeral. Though he had insisted on a simple ceremony and asked to be cremated, with his ashes spread in the countryside in the three regions of Vietnam, the new leaders instead buried him, Lenin-like, in a large mausoleum in Hanoi. Even in death, the revolution's leaders continued to rely on Ho as a symbol of nationalism, resistance, and liberation, and as a "guardian angel." As Vietnamese heroes in the past could invoke the memories of past national liberators, "so now could his followers call on the unsullied and larger-than-life memory of Ho Chi Minh, a mighty reservoir of solace and inspiration."²⁷

While 1969 and 1970 were difficult years for the Vietnamese revolution--exacerbated by

Phoenix and the fallout from Ho's death, as well as the American air wars--the NLF was able to regroup, hold onto its high levels of popular support, successfully recruit and infiltrate in the south, and by 1971 was stronger than ever. As Ngo Vinh Long concludes, "popular support in the South allowed the NLF to rise from the ashes of defeat like a Phoenix in spite of the American efforts to destroy it."²⁸ At the same time, however, America's extensive use of airpower was killing masses of Vietnamese in the north, especially civilians, and destroying much of the countryside, while the continued use of airpower and herbicides was doing the same to the south. Accordingly, General Giap in 1972 decided that only a general military offensive could end the destruction and convince Nixon of the futility of continued war--hence the Easter Offensive. Indeed, by 1972-1973, the PAVN took on more responsibility as the war assumed a more conventional character than it had before. By mid-1973, Le Duan and others were urging a final offensive to reunify Vietnam. As they saw it, the peace accords, Watergate, the Arab oil embargo, and economic recession in the United States would make it impossible for American forces to return to bail out the RVN. In addition, the PRG had about 100,000 of its own forces killed in the two years *after* the cease-fire, so ending the bloodshed by winning the war was an incentive as well.

Let Saigons Be Bygones: the Final Offensive

By 1974, Hanoi had given up hope that the peace treaty would end the conflict and achieve reunification. It was, to the PRG and North Vietnamese, a bleak reminder of the 1954 Geneva settlement. Thus they began to build a vast highway running from the seventeenth parallel to the Saigon area, about 1000 kilometers, with vast connecting routes for supply and communication. By early 1975, the road network, Corridor 613, could handle 10,000 trucks in traffic and refuel them via a 5000 kilometer pipeline. Ironically, however, Corridor 613 was

barely used, for when the final offensive began, PAVN and PRG forces so totally overwhelmed the ARVN that they simply used the existing highways in the RVN.

In December 1974, Hanoi decided on a strategy to attack Vietnam below the seventeenth parallel in two stages lasting two years, hoping to wear down the ARVN and gain victory in 1976 or 1977. Initially, Hanoi's planned to liberate the Central Highlands, in constant fighting throughout 1975, but southern-based military commanders, more aware of how weak the ARVN really was, lobbied for attacking further southward. So on 26 December 1974, General Van Tien Dung, with 22 infantry divisions, hundreds of tanks, and thousands of artillery pieces, began bombarding Phuoc Long province near the Cambodian border and only about 50 miles from Saigon. By 7 January 1975 the entire province came under PRG control as the ARVN barely resisted and American B-52s did not reappear, as South Vietnam had hoped and the enemy had feared. Hanoi was thrilled, as the offensive had exceeded its most optimistic hopes. As Le Duan exclaimed, "never have we had military and political conditions so perfect or a strategic advantage so great as we have now."²⁹

Next, General Dung planned to cut the RVN in half, driving from the central highlands near Cambodia across Vietnam to the South China Sea. On 9 March, three PAVN divisions attacked Ban Me Thuot, the largest urban center in the central highlands about 150 miles northwest of Saigon. The ARVN, thinking the attack was a diversion, did not fight back and the city fell three days later. The PRG, hardly able to keep pace with the southern army's collapse, decided to shift its focus to the capital. Thieu had abandoned the central highlands and called for an ARVN retreat toward Saigon and the delta. General Dung, while preparing for the final assault in the south, also had his forces attack Hue, Danang, and Kontum, all of which fell in just weeks. Thieu's days were obviously numbered, but he refused PRG offers to negotiate a

solution based on his resignation. On 20 April, however, after the U.S. Congress refused President Gerald Ford's request to send \$700 million to the RVN, Thieu finally quit, though the United States did "loan" him aircraft to conduct terror raids on his way out. On 26 April, General Dung began the "Ho Chi Minh Campaign" and the ARVN fully collapsed. American helicopters scrambled to get over 7000 American and RVN personnel out of the capital while U.S. ships in the South China Sea evacuated another 70,000 Vietnamese out of the country. On 30 April 1975, tanks rolled toward the presidential palace, crashed through the gates, liberated, or conquered, Saigon, and flew the PRG flag from the palace balcony. "Saigon" ceased to exist and the capital was renamed "Ho Chi Minh City," while in Hanoi crowds began chanting "Long Live Ho Chi Minh." General Tran Van Tra, who led the final assault, was overtaken with emotion and "suddenly felt as if my soul was translucent and light, as if everything had sunk to the bottom."³⁰ The Vietnam War had ended . . .

Vietnam After 1975: The Perils of Peace

In his final testament, written just a few months before he died, Ho poetically envisioned that "our rivers, our mountains, our people will always be; The American aggressors defeated, we will build a country ten times more beautiful." Had the wars in Indochina ended years earlier, before the destruction became incomprehensible and the bitterness so deep, Ho's dream might have been fulfilled. But by 1975, after 30 years of open warfare against the French and Americans, and against each other, the most obvious characteristic of Vietnamese society was the devastation, north and south. During the "Second Indochina War," the United States conducted warfare on a scale that would have been unimaginable to an earlier generation. Millions of tons of bombs, artillery, herbicides and the like tore Vietnam apart on both sides of the seventeenth parallel (though, ironically, the United States dropped six times more bombs on its ally, the

RVN, than on the enemy, the DRVN) and caused human tragedy on a mass scale. Disease epidemics, starvation, and poverty occurred at frightening rates as well. The U.S. presence in Vietnam also fundamentally altered the structure of traditional society there. Americans flooded what had been an agrarian country with technology, money, and consumer culture, thereby reversing many of the cultural values that Vietnamese had held. The drug trade, black market, prostitution and other underworld activities flourished. Not surprisingly the natives resented this. Just as many Americans held the government and army of the RVN in contempt, a good number of Vietnamese believed that the Americans had encouraged them to fight a war, had not treated them as equals, introduced western vices to their society, had a drug-addicted army, often supported the enemy, and betrayed them after 1973. Both physically and morally, Vietnam was a dramatically different place because of the Americans. Though militarily and politically foiled and its hegemony challenged, the U.S. empire had struck back, repeatedly, against Vietnam. So amid the victory celebrations, a new batch of problems was emerging. As Pham Van Dong recognized, “waging a war is simple, but running a country is very difficult.”³¹

Hanoi had been counting on Nixon’s promise of reconstruction aid to start the long and difficult task of rebuilding the newly renamed *Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, or SRV. The Ford and Carter administrations, however, refused to follow through on their predecessor’s agreement, with Carter, the “human rights president,” incredibly claiming that “the destruction was mutual” between the United States and Vietnam.³² Congress, once more aggressive after the “dovish” Vietnam years, in fact passed laws forbidding American aid to the SRV, and then cutting Vietnam off from international lending agencies to which it contributed, such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Reconstruction, hard enough already, would become virtually impossible without access to outside capital. In large measure, the United States justified its hard

line on aid to the SRV because of alleged failures by Hanoi to fully account for Americans who had been held as POWs or were listed as “Missing in Action” [MIA] during the war. But the charges were a sham. No credible evidence had ever existed that any Americans were held against their will by the Communists in Indochina, but the allegations, cleverly contrived by Nixon and Ross Perot and parroted by other politicians, the media, and Hollywood, struck a nerve in the United States. Americans, perhaps humiliated by the failure in Vietnam, were not about to send funding to Vietnamese Communists while “our boys” were imprisoned there.³³

Inside the SRV, as the poverty and bitterness increased, Hanoi had its own missteps. Though no “bloodbath,” as predicted by American conservatives and RVN leaders, ever took place, perhaps over a hundred thousand supporters of the Saigon regime were sent to “reeducation camps,” prisons, as reprisal and for indoctrination, while many others were kept under surveillance by the government and not allowed to leave the country. Vietnam also had to deal with a series of foreign policy crises. In late 1978--as the Khmer Rouge genocide continued and China was promising to teach “a lesson” to the “ungrateful and arrogant” Vietnamese, whom President Deng Xiaoping called “dogs”--Pham Van Dong decided to take preemptive measures, invading Cambodia, which had Chinese support, on Christmas Day and pouring into Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979, thereby mercifully closing the “killing fields,” placing a new government in power, and leaving 120,000 troops to occupy the country. For many years thereafter, the United States would vote to seat the Khmer Rouge as the official government of Cambodia at the United Nations. Though they were Communists and killed huge numbers of their own, they too hated the Vietnamese, and that was what mattered. Just six weeks after the Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia, China, with American approval, invaded Vietnam once more, crossing into Tonkin and clashing with over 100,000 regional and local military groups.

Though outnumbered two to one, the Vietnamese, despite heavy losses, held off the PRC forces, causing about 20,000 casualties and forcing them to retreat. For Hanoi, the wars just would not end.

Over the past two decades, the SRV has diverged markedly from the revolutionary path that brought it national liberation, and has begun to take on many of the characteristics of the western invaders it ousted. Politically, Hanoi cracked down on movements for democracy and equality, suppressing both labor and veterans of the war in the process. Economically, it began a policy of *doi moi*, similar to Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* in the Soviet Union, which was an integration of capitalist ideas into its nominally socialist economy. The SRV offered enticing terms to lure in foreign investment, while Vietnamese workers and peasants were often without work and land, and hundreds of thousands of young women worked as prostitutes in urban areas. Within the government and army, corruption was becoming a major problem as well. As Hanoi official Nguyen Van Linh complained in 1993, "bureaucratism, corruption, and bribery . . . have reached a serious level without any sign of abating . . . [They] have reached such a widespread and alarming proportion that many people regard them as a national disaster."³⁴

Such conditions have continued as the market economy has expanded in Vietnam. Asian investors, particularly Japanese, have developed an infrastructure and tourist industry, and, as of 1996, American corporations have been moving into the SRV after President Bill Clinton normalized relations with Vietnam. For the Vietnamese, however, *doi moi* is at best a mixed blessing; the U.S. shoe company Nike, for instance, has invested millions in the Vietnamese economy, but pay its workers about \$30.00 a month, not really a living wage, and forbids any attempt to organize or act collectively. As foreign firms set up shop in Vietnam then, many contradictions between Ho's vision and the realities of bureaucracy and the market are obvious

for all to see: vast inequality, unemployment, class antagonisms, corruption, and authoritarian politics. In 1995, during the twentieth anniversary celebration of the end of the war, an official sponsor of the festivities was Pepsi-Cola, making one wonder who won the Vietnam War after all

The United States After 1975: Kicking the “Vietnam Syndrome”

The American defeat in Vietnam was a natural outcome of the way the war was developed and fought. The enemy--the NLF, VC, PAVN, and PRG--was popular, dedicated, and effective--while the ally, the government and army of the RVN was corrupt, repressive, and not terribly competent, and American soldiers were often as interested in getting high or fighting among themselves as with engaging the enemy. America's military leaders were never enthused about intervening in Vietnam and, once there, were internally divided over the nature of the war and U.S. strategy; they never achieved the unity of purpose so essential to warmaking. Significant segments of the public at home resisted the war as well, adding to the sense of crisis that Vietnam was causing. The war also caused international distress, as America's European allies wanted the United States to deescalate and disengage, both because the war was hurting the world economy and its primary interests were not in Indochina but in the developed western world. Henry Kissinger recognized this and declared 1973 the “Year of Europe,” but also delivered a stern lecture to the allies about the responsibilities of American world leadership, which did not go over well. In retrospect, all these factors put the United States at a great political and military disadvantage in Vietnam. The Americans were simply on the wrong side of history, fighting an implacable enemy which had a national tradition of ousting foreign interlopers. While the United States was not even 200 years old when the Vietnam War occurred, the Vietnamese had 2000 years of experience fighting for independence under their

belts.

America's defeat, even if it was unavoidable, caused anguish at home. The air of invincibility that had developed throughout the Cold War was punctured and Americans, for the first time in many of their lives, had to think about the limits of U.S. power. For a few years after Vietnam, this debate continued, but by the 1980s, influential Americans were trying to re-write the memory of the war. In the immediate aftermath of Vietnam, the United States conducted itself in a somewhat more circumspect manner internationally, but remained clearly engaged in world affairs. Because of the economic effects of the war, Nixon had significantly reduced defense spending after 1970, and, perhaps because of the bad taste left by Vietnam, did not intervene in a civil war in Angola ultimately won by a Socialist group. At the same time, Nixon escalated the amount of American weapons sold abroad, had the CIA sabotage the Cuban economy by introducing a swine flu virus, supported the apartheid regime in South Africa, and helped facilitate the overthrow of President Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. Despite the impression that Vietnam was causing America to retreat from its global "responsibilities," it was, in many fundamental ways, "business-as-usual" in the Nixon years. Indeed, any funk or malaise associated with the Vietnam War did not last terribly long.

In 1980, Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan called the Vietnam War a "noble cause" and many national leaders, military officials, and scholars began to reevaluate the war in a more positive light, often claiming that the United States had gone to war for all the right reasons--anti-communism, democracy, national security--in Vietnam, had conducted itself with skill and admiration during the war, but had been "stabbed in the back" by the media and antiwar movement at home. Hollywood added to this revival with pro-war or pro-military movies like *Uncommon Valor*, *Red Dawn*, and especially Sylvester Stallone's *First Blood* and

Rambo II, while the militarist novels of Tom Clancy helped lift Americans out of their post-Vietnam self-doubt as well. To some degree, then, this rehabilitation of the war emboldened the Reagan administration to conduct large scale and initially “secret” wars against insurgent groups in Latin America and the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua, using much the same rationale in that part of the world in the 1980s as its predecessors had in Indochina in the 1960s. In fact, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger invoked the revisionist interpretation of Vietnam explicitly when he claimed that, unlike in Vietnam, “we must never send Americans into battle unless we plan to win.” In 1991, that school of thought reached its apex as George Bush linked the U.S. war against Sadaam Hussein with Vietnam, and at its conclusion boasted that “by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam Syndrome once and for all.”³⁵

Bush’s glee was somewhat premature and not totally justified, however. As he and his successor, Bill Clinton, would discover, the issue of Vietnam would just not go away. During the 1992 draft, Clinton ran into trouble after the media reported that he had tried to pull strings to avoid service in Vietnam. Moreover, comparisons to Vietnam would pop up whenever the United States was debating involvement in foreign lands. During the 1980s, following the example of the Vietnam antiwar movement, a strong anti-intervention movement emerged to protest Reagan’s aggression in Central America, and a popular slogan was “El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam.” Likewise, references to the war in Indochina were omnipresent whenever U.S. policy toward Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, and other lands was discussed. It seems as if virtually every interview concerning U.S. foreign policy today ultimately comes to the question of whether this could turn into “another Vietnam.” And the American people continue to believe that the war was “fundamentally wrong and immoral”--70 percent in a 1991 poll.

On a more personal level, the war hurt millions of Americans too. In addition to the over

58,000 soldiers killed in the war, untold numbers of veterans have had a difficult adjustment back to “normal” lives after Vietnam. Although Hollywood often has unfairly stereotyped veterans as being deranged and troubled, in fact hundreds of thousands suffer from “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” a psychological and emotional condition involving a wide array of problems such as recurring nightmares, jumpiness, flashbacks, paranoia, and others. Many other veterans are addicted to drugs and alcohol, and have violent or abusive personalities, while, amazingly, almost twice as many veterans have committed suicide since the war ended than died in Vietnam. Thousands of other Vietnam-era soldiers have also suffered health problems such as cancer and immune system disorders, as well as high rates of birth defects in their children, due to their exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides.

In 1982, one of the more powerful moments in the Vietnam era occurred when “The Wall,” the Vietnam Memorial, was dedicated on the Mall in Washington D.C. Two long narrow blocks of black concrete which contain the names of every American killed in Vietnam, the monument emotionally details the human costs of the war to the United States. But the country of Vietnam would need perhaps 40 or 50 such “walls” to commemorate their own losses during the American War. Instead, still-destroyed buildings, burned-out villages, land mines, disabled young men, and bitterness and recrimination mark their war. It will certainly be some time, if ever, before the Vietnamese, as Ho Chi Minh wished, will build a country “ten times more beautiful.”

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7. Public Papers of the President: Richard Milhous Nixon, 1970, 470-1.
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9. In Tom Wells, The War Within (Berkeley, 1994), 424-5.
10. In DeBenedetti and Chatfield, An American Ordeal, 280.
11. Kissinger, The White House Years, 1032.
12. In Hersh, The Price of Power, 516.
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21. Roger Morris, Uncertain Greatness (New York, 1977), 190.
22. In Kolko, Anatomy of a War, 442.
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25. In Ibid., 331.
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27. Jamieson, Understanding Vietnam, 359.
28. Ngo Vinh Long, "The Tet Offensive and Its Aftermath," in Gilbert and Head, The Tet Offensive, 119.
29. In Olson and Roberts, Where the Domino Fell, 256.
30. In Young, Vietnam Wars, 298.
31. Ibid., 250; Pham Van Dong in Karnow, Vietnam, 9.
32. In New York Times, 25 March 1977, 10.
33. The best treatment of this issue is Bruce Franklin, M.I.A., or Mythmaking in America (New Brunswick, N.J., 1993).
34. In Kolko, Anatomy of a War, 570.
35. Reagan in New York Times, 19 August 1980; Weinberger in Washington Post, 12 November 1984; Bush in Washington Post, 20 January 1991, and in Paterson, American Foreign Relations, 578.