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The Vietnamization of the War

A fundamental revisionist complaint about how President Johnson conducted the Vietnam War is that he subordinated America's military effort to two agendas, one domestic and one international. The former was the Great Society program of social reform. The latter was the imperative of avoiding actions that might lead to Chinese or possibly even Soviet involvement in the war. As a result, revisionists argue, Johnson put restrictions on the US forces in Vietnam that made it impossible to win the war.

This subordination of Vietnam War policy to both a domestic and an international agenda continued under President Nixon. Nixon was a longtime supporter of US intervention in South Vietnam, but now as president he had to operate within constraints at home imposed by the declining popular support for the Vietnam War in general and the influence of the antiwar movement in particular. His domestic agenda therefore was to reduce or mute antiwar sentiment as much as possible while boosting support for his management of the war. This required, as Nixon put it, ending the war "as quickly and honorably as possible."[1] Nixon's concerns about antiwar sentiment on a number of occasions influenced him to reject or place limits on military options in Vietnam. One example is his rejection of the so-called Duck Hook plan of 1969, which would have involved a new bombing campaign against North Vietnam with an expanded target list and the mining of the port of Haiphong. Another is the 20-mile "tether" placed on allied forces during the 1970 incursion into Cambodia,

[1] Quoted in Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam*, 135.

a limit that helped the North Vietnamese in the path of those forces organize their defenses.[2]

Nixon's international agenda reinforced the imperative to withdraw US armed forces from Vietnam. But while Nixon's domestic and international concerns both required a US withdrawal, it was his approach to US foreign policy as whole – his overall international agenda – that determined *how* that withdrawal had to be done. That agenda was détente, the policy of relaxing tensions with the Soviet Union, which Nixon crafted along with Henry Kissinger, his national security advisor and, later, secretary of state. Détente was the Nixon/Kissinger strategy for adjusting US foreign policy to the new international conditions of the late 1960s. On the one hand, in historian Robert Beisner's apt phase, the United States was a "wounded power" that needed "new leverage" for its policy of containment; on the other hand, that leverage existed because of the growing spilt between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC).[3]

Détente was designed to reduce the cost of the Cold War, facilitate an agreement that would limit nuclear arms, and encourage the Soviet Union to follow policies that would reduce its expansionist tendencies in return for economic benefits. Its implementation was linked to a diplomatic initiative to the PRC, which Washington still did not officially recognize although that regime had been in power since 1949. That measure, taking advantage of the emerging Sino-Soviet split, was designed to promote a normalization of relations between the United States and the PRC while providing a lever to induce Moscow to reach the accommodations Nixon and Kissinger believed were essential to American national interests. Nixon and Kissinger believed that the United States could only deal with the Soviets from a position of strength. That in turn required the United States to extradite itself from the Vietnam War, but only while ensuring the continued existence of a non-Communist regime in South Vietnam. American credibility, which would be severely undermined if the United States simply abandoned South Vietnam to its fate, was essential to implementing détente, and this meant that the US exit from Vietnam could not be tainted with the stain of defeat. In Nixon's words, implementing détente required that Washington exit from Vietnam having first secured "peace with honor."

[2] The term "tether" is Dave Richard Palmer's. See Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: A History of the Vietnam War from a Military Man's Viewpoint* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 299.

[3] Robert Beisner, "History and Henry Kissinger," *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 4 (Fall 1990): 522.

Making matters more complicated, Nixon and Kissinger took office with very few options or room to maneuver regarding Vietnam. This is a point on which orthodox and revisionist commentators agree, and it helps explain why upon entering office Nixon directed Kissinger to form a special study group to examine the situation in Vietnam and why it took several months during 1969 for the Nixon/Kissinger overall Vietnam policy to emerge. George Donelson Moss, author of *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, provides a typical orthodox analysis when he notes the main reasons why US options were so limited: the battlefield stalemate, North Vietnam's strategy of protracted war and determination to conquer South Vietnam, the Soviet Union's refusal to push Hanoi to end the war, domestic US constraints, and the South Vietnamese regime's determination to avoid a settlement that would endanger its survival. From a revisionist perspective, while these factors certainly were important, Nixon's lack of options was primarily the result of Johnson's mismanagement of the war. As Dave Richard Palmer points out, while fighting the war ineptly Johnson nonetheless escalated the fighting "quite beyond the point of public tolerance," and Nixon therefore could not increase US strength on the battlefield. In addition, during 1968 Johnson had stopped bombing Hanoi and begun negotiations with North Vietnam, "so both of these powerful levers were denied to Nixon." In *Ending the Vietnam War*, his defense of how he and Nixon handled the war, Kissinger points out, "the liberal Establishment, which had launched America into the quagmire, had become demoralized and left the field to the radical protesters." Many conservatives also "had abandoned the cause of Indochina in frustration." The Nixon administration, Kissinger continues, had inherited a dilemma: "The possibility of victory had been given up by our predecessors," yet "simple abandonment was precluded by our concept of honor." The United States had to somehow stabilize the situation in South Vietnam while gradually withdrawing American forces so that international stability was not threatened and America's role in defending its allies was undamaged. Overall, as Dave Richard Palmer succinctly puts it, "No American president before had ever faced so complex a war situation with so few options remaining."[4]

[4] Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 328; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 272–73; Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extradition from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 10, 550. Or, as Kissinger more caustically told *Der Spiegel* in 2005, "Leading members of the government which had started the war later joined the peace movement." See www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/spiegel-interview-henry-kissinger-on-europe-s-falling-out-with-washington-a-379165-druck.html

Nixon dealt with this dilemma by turning to measures Johnson had refused to take. Even as Nixon withdrew US forces from Vietnam, while negotiating with North Vietnam to reach an agreement that would ensure the survival of a non-Communist South Vietnam, and even as he at times placed limits on his American forces in Vietnam, he also rejected some key restraints that Johnson had imposed on the American war effort as he sent those forces there. Specifically, Nixon refused to confine US ground operations to South Vietnam given the importance of North Vietnam's use of Cambodia as a supply route and sanctuary for its troops. He refused to permit southern Laos, the site of the main part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to remain immune from an effort by South Vietnamese ground forces to cut that route. Finally, when in 1972 negotiations stalled and Nixon resumed the bombing of North Vietnam, he removed most of the limits Johnson had imposed during the Rolling Thunder campaign of 1965–1968.

VIETNAMIZATION AND THE LOST VICTORY

Nixon's strategy of withdrawing from Vietnam while attempting to guarantee the survival of South Vietnam produced the policy known as Vietnamization. Aside from serving American needs outside Vietnam, the withdrawal of US troops was viewed, in the words of a Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) report, as "a necessary method of compelling the South Vietnamese to take over the war."[5] Vietnamization meant turning over the responsibility for waging the war to the South Vietnamese. It had several components: strengthening and expanding the South Vietnamese army; pacification, or spreading and solidifying government control of rural areas, an approach that included land reform and permitting local self-government; and improving the South Vietnamese government and its ability to deliver services to its people. While assessments of Vietnamization among revisionists vary widely, some argue that the team of Abrams, Bunker, and Colby responsible for Vietnamization achieved a major success. Between 1969 and 1972, the Saigon regime became stronger and more stable, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) improved considerably as a fighting force, the pacification program spread and solidified the government's control of the countryside, and Communist forces inside South Vietnam became considerably weaker, a fact Hanoi acknowledged in commentaries published after its victory. Many

[5] Quoted in Sorley, *A Better War*, 113.

revisionists thus agree with Colby, who was in charge of pacification from 1968 to 1971, that as of 1972, "On the ground in South Vietnam, the war had been won."[6] The victory was forfeited, Colby argues, when the United States abandoned South Vietnam between 1973 and 1975; hence the title of his book on the subject, *Lost Victory* (1989).

The most comprehensive and widely cited endorsement of the lost victory thesis is Lewis Sorley's monograph *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (1999). Sorley, a Vietnam veteran, argues that between 1968 and 1973 the United States, by adopting new tactics, both on the battlefield and in the villages and hamlets in the countryside, essentially defeated the Communist effort in South Vietnam. *A Better War* supplements, updates, and expands on *Lost Victory* – the reviewer in *Parameters*, the scholarly quarterly published by the US Army War College, called it "in many ways a companion volume" to Colby's work[7] – as well as on earlier revisionist accounts such as Dave Richard Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet*. *A Better War* has been strongly endorsed by some revisionist commentators, including military officers who like Sorley served in Vietnam. They include Colonel Stuart A. Herrington, the reviewer in *Parameters*, and Mackubin Thomas Owens, a US Marine infantry officer in Vietnam during 1968–1969 and later a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College.[8] Various aspects of Sorley's case have been supplemented by other scholars, among them John W. Shaw, whose monograph *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (2005) argues that this offensive into Cambodia was a major success, and Martin Loicano, whose article "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," defends ARVN's performance once it was properly armed with weapons that matched those of the Vietcong and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).[9]

[6] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 321.

[7] Colonel Stuart A. Herrington (USA, ret.), review of *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, by Lewis Sorley, *Parameters*, Autumn 2000. Available online at http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/00autumn/aut-rev.htm

[8] Mackubin T. Owens, "The Vietnam War: Winnable After All," Ashbrook Center at Ashland University, 1999. Available online at http://ashbrook.org/publications/oped-owens-99-vietnamwar/

[9] John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); Martine Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 37–80.

Some revisionists have a less positive view of what Vietnamization achieved between 1969 and 1972. For example, General Davidson argues that in 1972 South Vietnam suffered from too many of the "same old faults" that had undermined its war effort for years and overall remained too dependent on the United States for survival.[10] Other disagreements include conflicting evaluations regarding the differences between Westmoreland's and Abrams's respective approaches to the war, as well as about how successful each general was. Thus, in peering through the overall revisionist looking glass, one at best sees unclearly and sometimes darkly. Nonetheless, a strong case can be made that in the wake of the Tet Offensive, the anti-Communist position improved dramatically in South Vietnam.

US FORCES: FROM SEARCH AND DESTROY TO CLEAR AND HOLD

The gradual withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam began in mid-1969. From a peak of 540,00 in 1968, US troop strength in Vietnam declined to 480,000 by the end of 1969, 335,000 by the end of 1970, 157,000 by the end of 1971, and 27,400, almost none of whom were combat troops, by the end of 1972. Meanwhile, the US troops remaining in South Vietnam began to be used in a different way.

Exactly why that occurred, and how significant the change really was is a matter of debate among revisionists. Sorley argues that the change began in mid-1968, when General Abrams took over as head of MACV from Westmoreland, who returned to the United States to become Army Chief of Staff. Sorley quotes General Fred Weyand, Abrams's successor (in 1972) as MACV commander, who said, "tactics changed within fifteen minutes of Abrams taking command." What Abrams did, Sorley writes, was to abandon Westmoreland's search and destroy war of attrition in favor of what was called "clear and hold." Under clear and hold, large-unit sweeps designed to engage the enemy in major battles as part of an attrition strategy were deemphasized in favor of thousands of small-unit patrols and ambushes. These small-unit operations were done repeatedly in the same populated area to provide permanent security to the rural population. In contrast, search and destroy had involved moving from one area to another in search of hidden enemy main forces. Since prior to launching attacks the Communists pre-positioned supplies, from weapons

[10] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 711–12.

and ammunition to rice and other essentials, Abrams's small-unit patrols sought out and destroyed these supply caches, thereby making it more difficult, or even impossible, to carry out attacks. Abrams called this cutting off the enemy's "logistical nose." In Sorley's words, the point was "to screen the rural population from the enemy." Sorley approvingly quotes a journalist's distinction made in 1971 between the Westmoreland and Abrams approaches: "Where Westmoreland was a search-and-destroy and count-the-bodies man, Abrams proved to be an interdict-and-weigh-the-rice man." And this interdiction was done successfully. During 1969, for example, US and South Vietnamese forces seized almost 3,000 enemy caches, 50 percent more than in 1968. The supplies seized included 1,855 tons of ammunition, twice that of 1968, and 12,000 weapons.[11]

Davidson views the change, at least why it occurred, somewhat differently. He maintains that Abrams would have preferred large-unit battles but was unable to get them because in mid-1968 the North Vietnamese, in the wake of the Tet defeat, abandoned their large-unit strategy and returned to small-unit guerrilla warfare. Thus it was "not Abrams who changed American strategy for the ground war, but Giap and Troung Chin [a leading member of the Politburo]." The new American approach debuted in the spring of 1969 when Abrams, "thwarted by the enemy's refusal to fight in large units ... had to change his tactics to meet Giap's."[12] Two other factors that discouraged or made it difficult for Abrams to undertake large operations were decreasing manpower as US troops gradually were withdrawn and a specific order he received in July 1969 from Washington "to conduct the war with a minimum of American casualties."[13]

Abrams did undertake several large-unit operations during 1968 and 1969. The best known, and most controversial because of the high casualties US forces suffered, was the sweep in May 1969 by several thousand troops of the 101st Airborne Division into the A Shau Valley along the Laotian border. Dale Andrade views this and other operations as essentially a continuation of search and destroy. Davidson sees it differently. In his view, although Abrams had a new strategy, it did not

[11] Sorley, *A Better War*, 2, 199; Sorely, "Could the War Have Been Won?" in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War*, 406–7.

[12] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 572, 613.

[13] Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *The Journal of Military History* 72 (October 2008): 1226; Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 169.

prevent major clashes between large US and North Vietnamese units. Sorley has yet another perspective. He argues that the A Shau Valley campaign, which culminated in a bloody battle for some high ground that American troops, with considerable bitterness, dubbed "Hamburger Hill," was an extension of clear and hold. As Abrams saw it, Sorely reports, along with small-unit patrols in populated areas, it was necessary for large US units to attack North Vietnamese base areas in remote, lightly populated areas because these were the places where major caches of supplies were stored in preparation for large-scale attacks on populated areas. In this particular case, the target was called Enemy Base Area 611. Abrams believed it was essential to disrupt enemy logistical preparations and bases near the Laotian border. As he put it, "we destroy his [the North Vietnamese] tediously-prepared logistical arrangements and thus in the end deny large-scale attacks on the populated areas." Sorley argues that Abrams's overall strategy of "getting into the enemy's system" gave the major battles such as the one in the A Shau Valley "a coherence they lacked in the earlier days of the war." With regard to the A Shau Valley operation in particular, that fight and the continued presence of US troops in the area for the next three years served Abrams's purposes by preventing the North Vietnamese from preparing any operations against the major population centers to the east.[14]

THE CAMBODIAN CAMPAIGN

The time and place where Abrams's efforts to cut the North Vietnamese "logistics nose" melded neatly with Nixon's willingness to exceed the limits established by President Johnson was the 1970 offensive into Cambodia. The target area was Cambodian territory just across the South Vietnamese border. Orthodox commentators often assert that Nixon "widened," "extended," or "escalated" the war to describe what took place during that action.[15] Revisionists view that characterization as inaccurate or at best misleading. Kissinger notes that Cambodia's official "neutral" status was a sham. In fact, the offensive's target territory "was no longer Cambodian in any practical sense . . . Cambodian officials had been excluded from the soil of their own country; most, if not all, of the

[14] Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 164–65; Davidson, *Vietnam at* War, 614–15; Sorley, *A Better War*, 138–41.

[15] For example, see Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 348.

population had been expelled." These were "illegally occupied territories" under control of the North Vietnamese. Dave Richard Palmer calls the situation as of 1968 a North Vietnamese "military occupation on parts of Cambodia." There were fourteen North Vietnamese military bases inside Cambodia, some no more than thirty-five miles from Saigon. About two-thirds of South Vietnam's population was exposed to attack from these bases. As long as the North Vietnamese bases in Cambodia remained immune from attack, "it was as if a loaded and cocked pistol was being held to the head of South Vietnam." Most fundamentally, as noted previously, Andrade points out that Cambodian bases, immune from attack along with those in Laos and North Vietnam, were part of the "unbeatable advantage" the United States had long given North Vietnam.[16] This situation gave Nixon his first, and primary, reason to move against Hanoi's forces in Cambodia.

The sequence of events that led to the Cambodian invasion dates from 1965. That was when Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's longtime ruler, first allowed the North Vietnamese the use of his country's port of Sihanoukville as an entry point for shipments destined for Communist forces in the southern part of South Vietnam. At the same time, hoping to keep his country from becoming entirely engulfed by the Vietnam War, beginning in 1969 Sihanouk also allowed the United States to secretly bomb North Vietnamese bases and lines of communication in Cambodia. This campaign (Operation Menu), however, could not stop the flow of supplies or eliminate the North Vietnamese military threat to the southern part of South Vietnam. Finally, in 1970 Sihanouk was overthrown in a coup led by his country's prime minister, Lon Nol. The main reason for the coup was widespread resentment of the North Vietnamese occupation of Cambodian territory, which Sihanouk was blamed for tolerating and abetting. Lon Nol immediately closed the port of Sihanoukville to the North Vietnamese, a serious blow to their efforts to supply their troops in the southern part of South Vietnam. When the North Vietnamese responded to the coup by seizing more territory and threatening the existence of Lon Nol's pro-Western government, Nixon had a second reason to attack their forces in Cambodia.

The Cambodian "incursion," as Nixon called it,[17] involved both US and ARVN forces. At home it provoked a serious of major antiwar

[16] Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 198–99; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 292–93; Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 162.

[17] For Nixon's speech informing the American people of the operation, see www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2490

demonstrations, especially on college campuses, that apparently rattled Nixon and led him to maintain tight limits on how far allied troops were allowed to go. This and other factors, including a delay in the start of the operation, compromised its effectiveness. This is reflected in the evaluations it has received. Dave Richard Palmer's assessment that overall the operation was a "distinct military success – though falling short of delivering the enemy a decisive blow" is shared by many revisionists. The campaign, Palmer writes, delivered a "jolting setback" to the North Vietnamese. Even more important, a large part of that jolt was delivered by the ARVN, which took the offensive against Hanoi's PAVN units and defeated them "at every turn." Not surprisingly, South Vietnamese morale soared.[18] Davidson is less upbeat. He points to the persistence of the "fundamental defects of the ARVN system" even during "almost ideal conditions" and laments that the main North Vietnamese troops managed to flee, meaning that "there was no great battle," as Nixon and Abrams had hoped. Still, Davidson's assessment is highly positive. Allied forces, he reports, killed or captured thousands of enemy troops, seized huge quantities of weapons and ammunition of all sorts, and confiscated fourteen million pounds of rice. The amount of small arms ammunition alone was equal to what Communist forces used in an entire year. Davidson cites estimates that North Vietnamese offensive plans were set back at least a year, possibly two. The operation thus was "quite successful militarily." It "struck the Communists a stunning blow by destroying their stores and bases in Cambodia"[19] and bought time both for Vietnamization and the US withdrawal from South Vietnam. Army veteran and military historian John M. Shaw, author of a comprehensive and well-received volume on the subject, offers a similar assessment. Shaw considers the campaign "fully justified and reasonably well executed." While hardly perfect, it seriously weakened the North Vietnamese, bolstered South Vietnamese morale, strengthened Vietnamization, and bought the United States time to complete an orderly military withdrawal.[20]

Even as they cite these successes, revisionists point to shortcomings in the Cambodian operation in terms of when it took place and its long-term impact. Dave Richard Palmer comments that the cross-border operations into Cambodia and Laos (the latter, against the Ho Chi Minh Trail, took place in 1971) were "moves of the strategic chessboard which should have been made in 1966 and 1967." Even Sorley, perhaps the most positive

[18] Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 299–301.
[19] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 625–30. [20] Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign*, 3, 170.

analyst of Abrams's "better war," mentions that the operation's impact was "ephemeral" and that in the "long run" it caused only a "temporary disruption" to North Vietnam's campaign to control South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.[21] However, as Sorley and other revisionists stress, the events that were decisive in South Vietnam's defeat in the long run were far from inevitable. The Cambodian campaign achieved a great deal and could have contributed to a different outcome of the war had US policy after 1973 been different: that is, had Washington fulfilled the commitments it made to the government of South Vietnam.

ARMING THE ARVN

There is a widespread consensus that ARVN suffered from multiple shortcomings and often performed poorly during the course of the Vietnam War. That consensus extends from many of the military men who fought the war, to journalists who covered the war, to scholars of all stripes who wrote about the war after it was over. American criticism of the ARVN dates from the arrival of US advisors during the Diem era: in discussing that period, Andrew Birtle refers to "the South Vietnamese Army's well-known dysfunctional behavior." Orthodox historian George C. Herring points out that the ARVN became an "object of ridicule" among US officers as American troops increasingly assumed the burden of the fighting after 1965. Orthodox commentators attribute ARVN's persistent problems of corruption, poor leadership, and lack of fighting spirit to the shortcomings and alleged ultimate illegitimacy of the South Vietnamese regime it was trying to defend. At least in part, this outlook extends to the revisionist camp. Even Lewis Sorley, in an article in which he defends the ARVN ("Reassessing ARVN"), acknowledges that deficiencies such as poor leadership and corruption were problems the ARVN "never really solved."[22]

There are, however, matters of degree, and some revisionists make a strong case that ARVN's improvement from the late 1960s through the early 1970s was significant to the point of being potentially decisive. The key point is that the previously mentioned faults, which after all are found in many armies, were not the only causes of ARVN's combat

[21] Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 308; Sorley, *A Better War*, 213.

[22] Andrew J. Birtle, "Triumph Forsaken as Military History," in *Triumph Forsaken*, 124; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 199–200; Lewis Sorley, "Reassessing the ARVN" (a lecture), 7. Available online at http://nguyrntin.tripod.com/arvn-sorley-2.htm

failures in the period up to 1968. Sorley points to another major problem: the inferior firepower of the rifles and carbines dating from World War II that the United States initially provided to the South Vietnamese when compared to the AK-47 assault rifles and other modern weapons the Soviets and Chinese had delivered to North Vietnam.[23] This deficiency existed for the ARVN not only when it faced regular PAVN units but also when it was in combat with supposedly lightly armed Vietcong guerrillas. The lack of proper armament was an important factor in the ARVN's inadequate performance during much of the war, at least until the late 1960s.

Military historian Martin Loicano focuses on this matter in "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War." His basic point is that "orthodox paradigms," which assume sociopolitical factors doomed the South Vietnamese regime and therefore the ARVN from the start, are inadequate because they do not take into account newly available sources and what new generations of scholars have concluded from them. Sociopolitical factors certainly "played a prominent role in the outcome of the war," but outcomes on the battlefield also depended heavily on "material factors," by which Loicano means the weapons each side had at its disposal.[24]

Loicano points out that from 1965 until the end of 1969, Communist soldiers, both Vietcong and PAVN, enjoyed a "substantial tactical advantage in firepower" over their ARVN opponents. By 1965 Communist forces were equipped not only with the AK-47 automatic rifles but also with modern machine guns and "devastating" rockets. When facing an enemy equipped with the AK-47, ARVN troops had to make do with outdated rifles that often placed them "on the receiving end of around ten times the firepower they could put out in response." This advantage, almost impossible to overcome in large engagements, was even more pronounced in the small skirmishes that made up most of the fighting in South Vietnam. Making matters worse, and adding insult to injury, some

[23] Lewis Sorley, "The Conduct of the War," in *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land*, 179; Sorley, "Could the War Have Been Won?" 411–12. The AK-47 is a modern Soviet-developed assault rifle that is widely regarded as the world's best such weapon. The American equivalent of the AK-47 is the M-16. Its debut when it was issued to some US troops in Vietnam in 1965 was marred by a variety of serious problems, including jamming, and to this day a debate continues about whether it is superior to the M-14, the rifle it replaced as the standard weapon for US troops. That debate, however, is beyond the scope of this book.

[24] Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 39–41.

of the older rifles supplied to the South Vietnamese were too large for the typical ARVN soldier. American tanks supplied to the ARVN were outdated and outmatched by those fielded by the PAVN, and there were similar problems with other weapons. In short, in combat with PAVN troops and even with many Vietcong units, ARVN troops were armed with inadequate weapons well into 1968.[25]

The finances of military aid to North and South Vietnam add to this picture. Between the late 1950s and the winter of 1967, Communist forces received about $1.895 billion in military aid from the Soviet Union, PRC, and other Communist benefactors. That compares to $1.476 billion in direct military aid received by South Vietnam between 1950 and 1968, a period about twice as long. In 1967, North Vietnam's allies provide it with $950 million versus $625 million received by South Vietnam. Loicano adds that recent studies suggest that aid to North Vietnam may have been "far greater" than the figures just cited.[26]

Sorley credits General Abrams, who became deputy commander of US forces in Vietnam in 1967, with changing this untenable situation. As a result, a small number of ARVN elite units received modern M-16 assault rifles during 1967, and they subsequently outperformed other units in combat. These elite units fought well in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, although it is also true, to the surprise of both US and Communist observers, that so did many under-equipped units. Meanwhile, Tet finally convinced Washington of the need to properly supply the ARVN, and within days of a report to President Johnson in February 1968, a total of 100,000 M-16 rifles were on their way to ARVN troops. By mid-1969, more than 700,000 M-16s were in ARVN hands, as were other modern weapons such as the M-79 grenade launcher, M-60 machine guns, and new radios for operating in the field.[27]

Despite these improvements, between 1969 and 1972 ARVN's firepower disadvantages were not eliminated, even as Washington withdrew most US ground forces from the war zone and turned over the bulk of the fighting to the South Vietnamese. During 1968 new and more powerful Russian tanks, self-propelled guns, mortars, recoilless rifles, and artillery arrived on the South Vietnam battlefield. The PAVN, Loicano notes, had become a "formidable conventional fighting force." Prior to 1972, when

[25] Ibid., 41–47. See also Sorley, "Reassessing ARVN," 2.
[26] Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 46.
[27] Sorley, "Reassessing the ARVN," 2; Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 46–47.

the United States belatedly began a new round of weapons upgrading, ARVN forces had to fight PAVN units armed with T-54 tanks, long-range rockets, and heavy artillery without comparable weapons. ARVN's light-weight tanks and personnel carriers "were simply no match for PAVN armor and artillery." PAVN weapons turned ARVN's armored personnel carriers into "deathtraps." And even though Hanoi's air force played little role in the fighting until 1975, it had been modernized to include MiG-21s that were superior to the ARVN's propeller aircraft and "low-end" jets.[28] Overall, as Andrade points out, by 1971, with PAVN units armed with Soviet T-34 and T-54 tanks and powerful new artillery pieces, the ARVN and remaining US troops in Vietnam were up against "a much more sophisticated and well-trained fighting organization than that faced by General Westmoreland."[29]

The modernization of the ARVN that began in 1967 and intensified after Abrams replaced Westmoreland was not without its problems. Loicano and Davidson both point out that the modernization program operated against severe time constraints – the last US troops left Vietnam in early 1973 – that made complete success, in Loicano's words, "all but impossible." Davidson notes the "monstrous problems" that stalked Vietnamization in general, pointing out that it was "caught between the United States troop withdrawal ... and the North Vietnamese timetable for aggression."[30]

Nonetheless, between 1968 and 1972 there was real progress. The total strength of the South Vietnamese armed forces, which included not only regular (army, navy, air force, and marines) forces but also irregular territorial forces at the local level, rose from about 700,000 to about 1.1 million. This expansion, along with much else, was in part made possible by Tet, which had sparked an upsurge of patriotism in South Vietnam that allowed President Thieu to mobilize additional troops. The expansion was accompanied not only by new arms but also by intense training programs that, despite continued firepower shortcomings, allowed not only ARVN troops but also the territorial troops to face the enemy on something that finally resembled an even playing field. As early as June 1968, a MACV analysis of the impact of providing ARVN troops with M-16 rifles reported significant improvements in ARVN operational

[28] Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 43–45.
[29] Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 171.
[30] Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 53; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 605, 607.

capability and morale. This improvement continued over the next three years. Probably the most striking progress was in the territorial forces. Because local territorial forces were essential to providing day-to-day security to villages and hamlets, arming them with modern weapons was a high priority; during 1969 they often received the prized M-16s before ARVN units. By 1972 these forces, numbering about 550,000, had played a crucial role in bringing most of rural South Vietnam under government control. As Sorley stresses, playing that role had implications beyond the battlefield; as the rural population of South Vietnam defended their homes and farms against the North Vietnamese and Vietcong, they demonstrated their support of and loyalty to the government in Saigon.[31]

LAM SON 719

By most assessments, ARVN, and by extension Vietnamization as whole, suffered its most serious setback in early 1971 in a campaign knows as Lam Son 719, ARVN's attempt to temporarily cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The plan was to move westward just south of the demilitarized zone into Laos for about twenty-five miles to the important trans-shipment town of Tchepone. South Vietnamese forces would destroy supplies stored in the region and remain in Laos for ninety days, thereby severing the Ho Chi Minh Trail until the upcoming rainy reason slowed traffic along the route. Because by then Congress had forbidden the use of US ground troops in Laos (and Cambodia), the operation had to be conducted with South Vietnamese troops only, albeit with considerable US air support and artillery support from inside South Vietnam. About 16,000 South Vietnamese troops were committed to the operation. In part because the North Vietnamese had anticipated such an assault after the Cambodian operation and therefore had made preparations where they thought it was most likely to occur, the ARVN eventually would face about 22,000 PAVN troops, a number that grew considerably by the time its troops exited Laos.

The operation initially went well but then was hampered by bad weather. At that point, only a month into the operation, President Thieu, acting against advice from General Abrams, ordered a withdrawal. That

[31] Loicano, "The Role of Weapons in the Second Indochina War," 48; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 280; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 603; Sorley, "Reassessing the ARVN"; Sorley, "Could the War Have Been Won?" 414–16; Sorley, *A Better War*, 306.

two-week operation turned into a disorderly and, in General Davidson's words, "agonizing affair," complete with demoralizing press pictures of desperate South Vietnamese troops hanging on to the skids of US helicopters assisting the retreat. General Bruce Palmer says that the retreat became a "nightmare" but also adds that US air support and helicopter operations enabled the South Vietnamese troops to get out of Laos "generally intact and in fairly good order." Kissinger makes basically the same point while also noting that the photographs of South Vietnamese troops were "untypical." By then the North Vietnamese had about 40,000 troops engaged in battle, sometimes attacking in human waves. Losses on both sides were extremely heavy. About 40 percent of the South Vietnamese force became casualties (killed or wounded) or were listed as missing; North Vietnamese losses, often the result of attacks by huge B-52 bombers, may have reached 20,000. Although no US ground forces participated in the operation, more than 250 Americans were killed and more than 1,100 wounded, mainly helicopter crew members.[32]

Orthodox commentators cite Lam Son 719 as irrefutable evidence of the failure of Vietnamization, and that assessment, albeit in moderated form, extends to the revisionist camp. James H. Willbanks saw combat in Vietnam during the 1972 Easter Offensive and currently is director of the Department of Military History at the US Army Command and Staff College. While critical of some central revisionist positions, he shares, with caveats, the fundamental revisionist position that the war could have been won with a different US approach. Willbanks argues that Vietnamization failed because it began too late and did not address several major problems that plagued the South Vietnamese government and its armed forces. This, along with the flawed Paris Peace Accords of 1973, America's determination to exit Vietnam, and the resultant withdrawal of US support for South Vietnam, "set the stage" for the collapse of Saigon's military forces. With regard to Lam Son 719, Willbanks maintains that although it temporarily disrupted the PAVN buildup in Laos and inflicted severe losses on the North Vietnamese, in the end the operation was "a defeat for ARVN and a setback to Vietnamization."[33]

[32] Most of these statistics are from Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 649–50. See also James H. Willbanks, *A Raid Too Far: Operation Lam Son 719 and Vietnamization in Laos* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 59–63.

[33] James H. Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam: How America Left and South Vietnam Lost its War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 114–15, 286–87.

Davidson essentially agrees; he finds that the operation demonstrated that "while Vietnamization had made progress," both the South Vietnamese government and the ARVN still had "deep flaws" that would require "years, probably decades" to resolve. He adds that US and ARVN planners should have known beforehand that the extremely difficult terrain, North Vietnamese capabilities, and South Vietnamese deficiencies meant the operation could not succeed. Dave Richard Palmer is somewhat more positive, calling the results of Lam Son 719 "a mixed bag" since despite shortcomings, it delayed a North Vietnamese invasion by a year. He adds that, as with the Cambodian campaign, an operation such as Lam Son 719, presumably with the participation of US ground troops, should have taken place in 1966 or 1967. Bruce Palmer uses the word "mixed" and notes that the ARVN's shortcomings "did not bode well for the future." At the same time, he points out that together the Cambodian and Laos operations disrupted North Vietnamese activities to the point where they saved South Vietnam from defeat at Hanoi's hands during the 1972 Easter Invasion, a point also made by Kissinger.[34]

Sorley offers the most positive assessment. Aside from pointing out the PAVN losses in men and equipment, he cites a Polish (i.e., Communist) source regarding how Lam Son 719 hurt the North Vietnamese and how the French military mission in Hanoi reported a "devastating" effect on both civilian and military morale in North Vietnam. He also cites a message from General Abrams to Westmoreland in August 1971 that reported lower enemy military activity and infiltration since the operation. Sorley also acknowledges the generally negative evaluations of the operation and the "residual deficiencies" in ARVN that it revealed.[35]

MILITARY OPERATIONS AND VIETNAMIZATION

Sorley credits Abrams for conceiving and implementing the new overall strategy that won the war after 1968; however, other revisionist commentators point out that the circumstances created by the Tet Offensive made that strategy possible. According to Andrade, Tet created an environment that allowed Abrams to do what had been denied to Westmoreland.

[34] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 654–56; Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 308; Bruce Palmer, *The 25-Year War*, 113–14; Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 204–5.

[35] Sorley, *A Better War*, 261–65, 270–71.

As a result of Tet, Communist main-force units had been driven away from the population centers. Hanoi moved those forces, as Birtle puts it, to "the relative safety of the hinterland and cross-border sanctuaries where they nursed their wounds and waited for America's withdrawal to create more favorable circumstances." Although these units were still a potential threat, the fact that they had been driven away from where most people lived turned the ongoing battle in the rural areas of South Vietnam into a traditional guerrilla insurgency. Meanwhile, Vietcong cadres in the villages, whose network constituted what Andrade calls "the glue that held the insurgency together," had been "decimated" during the Tet fighting. US/South Vietnamese operations therefore faced far less resistance than they had several months earlier. Andrade quotes Abrams's October 1968 comment on this development: "There's more freedom of movement throughout Vietnam than there has been since the start of the US buildup."[36]

This improved post-Tet situation benefited Vietnamization, as did the Cambodian campaign and, albeit indirectly, Lam Son 719. Willbanks points out that even if Lam Son 719 was a setback to Vietnamization, it also took a severe toll on the PAVN in terms of casualties, disrupted its buildup in Laos, and therefore bought Vietnamization desperately needed time. He quotes military historian Keith Nolan, author of a monograph on the operation called *Into Laos*, to the effect that Vietnamization "had been tested, had strained but not cracked, and now had continued room to grow."[37]

PACIFICATION

This positive impact of these military campaigns was especially evident when it came to pacification, the effort to broaden and deepen the South Vietnamese government's control over the countryside. Pacification was nothing new; it had a history going back to the Diem regime. What was new after Tet was the emphasis it received, how it was carried out, and, crucially, its success. The post-Tet pacification effort was based on an organization set up in 1967 called Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). Its first boss was Robert Komer,

[36] Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 164–65; Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians," 1226.

[37] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 115. See also Keith W. Nolan, *Into Laos: The Story of Dewey Canyon II/Lam Son 719, Vietnam 1971* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1986).

a civilian whose nickname, "Blowtorch," reflected his ability to cut through bureaucratic red tape and get things done. William Colby became his deputy in February 1968. After being disrupted by Tet, the CORDS pacification effort really got off the ground in November 1968 under what was called the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC). This campaign was conceived by Colby, who took over CORDS that same November and led it until 1971. The APC was an intense ninety-day effort to bring 1,300 hamlets from what was called a "contested" to a "secure" state; by January 1969 more that 85 percent of these formerly contested hamlets were considered secure. This achievement provided the basis for what was accomplished during the next three years. That longer-term success in turn is at the heart of the case made by several revisionists, most notably and emphatically by William Colby and Lewis Sorley, that as of 1972 the "war was won."[38]

Post-Tet pacification started with protecting villagers from the Vietcong. Significantly, instead of first turning to the ARVN, CORDS began locally by arming villagers so they could protect themselves. In *Lost Victory*, Colby points out that the Vietcong had long used terror and murder to intimidate villagers and force them to pay taxes and otherwise support the insurgency. Terror was a tool for undermining the government's authority. Colby reports that unarmed rural communities could be entered and controlled by five-man Vietcong squads, who could then collect taxes, gather supplies, and recruit local people. Therefore, as soon as Colby began working for CORDS, he made the formation of armed local self-defense units his first priority. This required the approval of the South Vietnamese government, a potential stumbling block because some top Saigon government officials were worried about the villagers' loyalty. President Thieu thought otherwise and in April 1968 ordered the creation of the People's Self Defense Force (PSDF). This took place in the wake of the Tet Offensive, after which thousands of South Vietnamese had asked the government for arms so they could protect themselves. During the APC that began in November 1968, what Colby calls "a three-month blitz," about 170,000 weapons were distributed. By 1971 approximately 500,000 weapons had been distributed to villages, where they were held by village chiefs and used by more than four million volunteers on a rotating basis. Above the PSDF were territorial forces at the local and regional levels (Popular Forces and Regional Forces), whose more than 400,000 members were part-time soldiers attached to ARVN and who, as

[38] Sorley, "The Conduct of the War," 191; Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 167.

mentioned earlier, increasingly were equipped with modern weapons, including M-16 rifles.[39]

Another crucial part of pacification was the Phoenix program, which was designed to uproot the Vietcong infrastructure (VCI) in the villages. Despite the damage the VCI suffered during Tet, as of 1968 it still retained what Sorley calls an "iron grip" in many rural areas, a fact confirmed by its continuing campaigns of terrorism and assassination. The Phoenix program was established by Colby in mid-1968 in cooperation with the South Vietnamese government. Phoenix, unfairly, has been tarnished by accusations that it was an assassination program. The reality is that Phoenix was an intelligence-gathering program, and while abuses may have occurred, Colby specifically and in writing prohibited assassination. Indeed, as Sorley points out, the goal was to capture Vietcong operatives alive to make use of the intelligence they could provide. Colby and others have stressed that in seeking to identify an assassination campaign in rural South Vietnam, one should look first and foremost to the Vietcong and the PAVN. While numbers regarding Vietcong/PAVN terrorism are necessarily imprecise, Summers estimates that Communist forces assassinated 61,000 South Vietnamese civil servants and village officials between 1958 and 1966; Colby gives figures of 6,000 officials and citizens killed and 15,000 wounded in 1969, "figures ... rather lower than those of 1968." Whatever the exact numbers, Andrade reports that in 1969, to "compensate for the losing situation" they faced, the Communists responded with a "greater emphasis on terrorism."[40]

Once Phoenix gathered intelligence, operations against the VCI were undertaken by military or police units: in Colby's words, by "all the forces engaged in the war" in South Vietnam. This meant that most VCI personnel who were killed lost their lives in combat situations. Combat occurred because, as Mark Moyar explains in *Phoenix and the Birds of*

[39] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 242–43, 254–60; Sorley, *A Better War*, 77–78; Brian M. Jenkins, "A People's Army for South Vietnam: A Vietnamese Solution" (Santa Monica: Rand, 1971), 14. One problem in discussing pacification in South Vietnam is that the word "pacification" can be misleading in terms of what the program actually was and attempted to do. The dictionary definition (usually given after something like "to pacify or appease") is the forcible suppression of a hostile population. As Colby describes in *Lost Victory*, pacification in South Vietnam meant something very different: protecting the rural population from the Vietcong. Pacification certainly involved violence, but mostly against enemy guerrillas and armed cadres.

[40] Sorley, *A Better War*, 144–45; Colby, *Lost Victory*, 246–47, 330–31; Harry G. Summers Jr., *The Vietnam Almanac* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1985), 284; Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 168.

Prey, by the late 1960s the ability of US and South Vietnamese forces to reach villages and hamlets often made it impossible for VCI cadres to live among the peasants. VCI cadres had to enter the villages accompanied by armed guerrillas, and they usually were armed themselves. Thus operations against VCI cadres often merged with those against Communist armed forces. As Moyar puts it, the favored "rifle shot" approach of targeting a single important VCI cadre often had to give way to the "shotgun" approach of apprehending or killing a large group of insurgents to net a few important ones. But the shotgun approach was not assassination. In a jointly written article on "counterinsurgency lessons," Andrade and Willbanks point out that more than two-thirds of the 81,000 Communist cadres "neutralized" between 1968 and 1972 were captured; of those killed, 87 percent died in combat operations.[41]

The Phoenix program was a major success, although it was less effective after 1969, the year the CIA withdrew from participation in it. According to Andrade and Willbanks, by eliminating so many Communist cadres between 1968 and 1972, Phoenix destroyed the VCI infrastructure in many places. This contributed mightily to the pacification effort as a whole. Estimates are that the number of VCI personnel shrank from about 85,000 in August 1967 to about 56,000 in February 1972. The number of guerrillas dropped to 25,000, one-third their number in January 1968; their ranks had to be replenished by PAVN soldiers from the North. Meanwhile, according to one authoritative estimate, the percentage of peasants living in government-controlled hamlets went from 42 percent in 1967 to 80 percent in 1972.[42] Other estimates for the latter figure are higher, approaching or exceeding 90 percent, depending on how one reads various sets of statistics.[43] Communist sources confirm Phoenix's successes. For example, the general who was second in command in South Vietnam called

[41] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 250; Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 370–71; Dale Andrade and Lieutenant Colonel James H. Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam for the Future," *Military Review*, March–April 2006, 20; Richard A. Hunt, "Pacification," in The *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*, 315. Hunt is the author of *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

[42] Andrade and Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix," 20–21; Hunt, "Pacification," 315. See also Colby, *Lost Victory*, 331.

[43] Andrade, "Westmoreland Was Right," 168, 178; Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification*, (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), 164–65.

Phoenix "extremely destructive," while a former Vietcong minister wrote in his memoirs that it was "dangerously effective." Moyar adds that the inability of the VCI to collect taxes, gather intelligence, and perform other services was a factor in the failure of the North Vietnamese 1972 Easter Offensive.[44]

The final and crucial piece of the pacification puzzle was put in place in 1970 when President Thieu announced his "Land to the Tiller" program. Within three years, with US financial help, the South Vietnamese government distributed almost three million acres of land to 950,000 families. The peasants received their land free of charge, while the government paid the former landowners. This act reduced tenancy in South Vietnam from about 60 percent to only 10 percent. It also played a role in reducing support for the Communists while helping the government win increased support among the peasantry. Rice production soared to record levels.[45] When combined with other government programs that provided for local elections and otherwise improved local government, it is reasonable to agree with Moyar that between 1969 and 1972 the South Vietnamese government succeeded in winning the support of the majority of the peasantry. Ironically, one measure of what the Land to the Tiller program meant only became evident after 1975 and the Communist victory: the peasants of the former South Vietnam, now under Communist rule, bitterly resisted collectivization to the point that by 1980 less than a quarter of families south of the 17th parallel belonged to collectives, many of which existed only on paper. Of course, beginning in 1986 the entire inefficient and corrupt collectivization system, an utter failure in Vietnam and everywhere Communist dictatorships imposed it on unwilling peasants, was abandoned.[46]

[44] Andrade and Willbanks, "CORDS/Phoenix," 21; Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, 392.

[45] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, 310–12, 394–96; Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985), 242–43; Sorley, *A Better War*, 149; see also Willard C. Mullar, "The Land-to-the-Tiller Program: The Operational Phase" (USAID/Vietnam, 1973). Muller at the time was the Associate Director for Land Reform for the US Agency for International Development.

[46] Michael Kirk and Nguyen Do Anh Tuan, "Exiting from Collective Agriculture: Land-tenure Reform in Vietnam," in *Millions Fed: Proven Successes in Agricultural Development*, eds. David J. Spielman and Rajul Pandya-Lynch (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2009), 139–40.

"THE WAR IS WON"

It is important to understand exactly what Sorley, Colby, and other revisionists mean when they argue that by 1972 "the war is won."[47] They do *not* mean that the fighting was over or that the Communists had conceded defeat. Rather, as Sorley puts it, it was that the South Vietnamese had achieved the ability to "maintain their freedom and independence of action." Sorley stresses that this in turn was dependent on the promise of continued American support, "similar to the support still being rendered to American allies in West Germany and South Korea,"[48] the two other countries divided as a result of the Cold War.

In terms of specifics, Sorley says that the South Vietnamese government controlled about 90 percent of the country's population as of 1969, adding that this control stayed at about that level in 1970 and 1971. He mentions the "myriad of economic improvements," including the record rice production levels achieved by 1971, and cites General Abrams on the increase in the stretches of road and number of bridges open since the low point in 1968. By 1972, Sorley argues, the ARVN had almost completed the plans for its expansion and improvement and now possessed a "formidable capability." He also cites other expert assessments, beginning with Colby's (discussed later) and John Paul Vann's. Vann was a legendary figure who served in South Vietnam for many years, first as a US Army officer advising ARVN and, after his retirement from the US Army, as a civilian advisor. He had seen the bad years first hand since the early 1960s. In January 1972, Vann commented that Vietnamization "has gone literally beyond my wildest dreams of success." He added, "We are now at the lowest level of fighting the war has ever seen." Sir Robert Thompson, the renowned British counterinsurgency expert, issued a similar upbeat assessment after touring South Vietnam in late 1970. Sorley drives home his argument by citing an authoritative North Vietnamese source, a volume on the Le Duc Tho–Kissinger negotiations published by Hanoi in 1995. Its authors admit that Communist forces "fell into a critical situation in 1969, 1970, 1971." That "situation" included the loss of many key rural areas, that "armed forces were worn out and compelled to withdraw gradually to mountain regions," and that "the war situation continued deteriorating." Le Duc Tho himself is quoted as admitting that by the end of 1968 the Communist side "had suffered

[47] Sorley, "Could the War Have Been Won?" 413.
[48] Sorley, "Reassessing ARVN," 11.

great losses" and that pacification caused "great difficulties" in 1969–1970. The overall situation was grim: "Our bases in the countryside were weakened, our positions shrank. Our main [force] troops were decimated and no long had footholds in South Vietnam and had to camp in friendly Cambodia."[49] All this provides is a reasonable basis for Sorley's heading of one of his works that "The War Is Won."

Rufus Phillips, who served in South Vietnam in a variety of capacities over many years, seconds Sorley's assessment. Pacification, he affirms, had largely succeeded. By 1972, most of South Vietnam, including the vital Mekong Delta area, "was not only pacified but peaceful," as was most of central South Vietnam. Phillips notes how in 1973 a South Vietnamese senator together with a retired general traveled in a civilian car, unarmed and without escort, from Saigon to Hue, almost the length of the entire country. He reports that many US officials attested to the improved security, including a National Security Council staffer who in 1973, during three visits to South Vietnam, traveled "securely" throughout the country accompanied only by an interpreter and one or two Vietnamese soldiers, "who mainly drove." Phillips's conclusion is that "a stalemate à la Korea" – meaning the South Vietnamese shouldering most of the struggle while the United States provided logistical and air support – "was not an impossible outcome."[50]

General Davidson's view of Vietnamization is more qualified. While discussing Lam Son 719 and providing a generally negative assessment of that operation, he notes that pacification "continued the great gains it had made in 1969 and 1970." Davidson acknowledges that pacification's degree of success is a matter of debate, but in the end he concludes that compared to other US efforts going on at the time, "pacification was the big winner in 1971."[51]

Moyar's perspective notes the positive impact of the Land to the Tiller program and the restoration of village and hamlet elections (which Diem had abolished) in1969. Moyar frequently cites Communist sources to back up his argument for the success of Vietnamization. One good example is a 1971 Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) directive that complains about how the United States and the "puppet" (South

[49] Sorley, *A Better War*, 149, 219, 223, 306; Sorley, "Could the War Have Been Won?" in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War*, 415–17. The heading "The War Is Won" is in "Could the War Have Been Won?"

[50] Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 301, 361, n.19.

[51] Davidson, *Vietnam at* War, 661.

Vietnamese) regime have "strengthened puppet forces, consolidated the puppet government," and established territorial defense forces "in many hamlets and villages." These activities, COSVN glumly reported, "caused many difficulties on friendly forces," including many defections to the South Vietnamese side. Moyar stresses that the key success in the countryside was leadership and power, and the ability of the South Vietnamese regime to provide these was vital to the success of Vietnamization. These were the main factors behind the decline the Vietcong's popularity (which began during the Tet offensive) after 1969 and the corresponding rise in the government's popularity. Thus by 1972 "in all but a few places, the large majority of hamlet dwellers had decided they preferred GVN [Government of South Vietnam] rule to Communist rule."[52]

Finally, William Colby provides an overview of Vietnamization's successes that combines the advantages of professional expertise with an eyewitness account. He explains how CORDS finally established a unified management structure for dealing with pacification and why that structure worked. As noted, he details the positive results of arming territorial forces with modern weapons and the successes of the Phoenix program. He notes the positive impact of the restoration of local village elections in 1969 and the effectiveness of a new national training center for elected village chiefs and other local officials. Colby praises the Land to the Tiller program, noting that it avoided the pitfall of Diem's program – which had required peasants to pay for their land – by giving the land to the peasants free of charge. In describing the situation as of Tet 1971, three years after the Tet Offensive, Colby reports that large areas of the countryside were sufficiently secure so that villagers could focus on economic activity and bettering their lives. Peasants could move their goods to market "free of fear that a mine planted the night before" would kill them or destroy their goods. Random attacks on cities had ceased. Colby covers various parts of the country, and he acknowledges that in several northern provinces that abutted Cambodia and Laos, while significantly improved, the situation was not as favorable as elsewhere. He is especially positive about the southern part of the country

[52] Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey*, 250, 298–322. The quotations are on pages 250 and 317. The term used to describe the process of defection of Communists to the South Vietnamese side was "rallying," and those who did so were "ralliers," although how many of them and how important they were are matters of debate.

around Saigon and the Mekong Delta, commenting extensively on the increased security and economic activity in those areas.[53]

In his chapter "Tet 1971: A Ride in the Countryside," Colby describes a motorcycle ride, "to celebrate the Tet holiday," he and John Paul Vann took across the entire Mekong Delta, from the sea to a town within sight of the Cambodian border. They rode alone, albeit with helicopters overhead just in case. There was a striking contrast, Colby writes, between his and Vann's "peaceful traverse" and the "ambushes, roadblocks, and enemy battalions" they would have encountered three years earlier. "Tet 1971 in Vietnam was a different world from that of Tet 1968," he concludes.[54]

WHY AN EASTER OFFENSIVE?

The effort to destroy that "different world" demanded what Willbanks calls a "radical departure" from North Vietnam's "strategy and methods of warfare."[55] Known as the Easter Offensive, the new strategy was a conventional invasion of South Vietnam. The question is why this departure occurred, as well as how to explain its timing. After all, the US withdrawal was continuing, and soon the PAVN would not have to worry about any US ground combat troops in South Vietnam. Orthodox commentators tend to focus on international considerations, in particular the progress of détente, which Hanoi feared might cause the Soviet Union and China to decrease their military aid to the point where it could no longer sustain a war effort sufficient to conquer South Vietnam. The result was that in early 1971 Hanoi decided it had to score a "decisive victory" during 1972. A related point was the imperative of forcing a settlement before Nixon could win reelection since he was likely to stiffen his terms after that eventuality. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen had access to previously classified North Vietnamese documents in writing *Hanoi's War* (2012), which at various points supports both orthodox and revisionist arguments. She writes that Nixon's détente policy toward the Soviet Union and opening to China convinced North Vietnam's leaders of the

[53] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 259, 313, especially pages 260, 264, 279, 293, 300, 306, 310.
[54] Ibid., 303–7.
[55] Willbanks, "Easter Offensive (Nguyên Huê Campaign) (1972)," *The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, 112. This section also draws on Willbanks's monograph *Abandoning Vietnam*, 124–29.

"urgency to change the balance of power on the ground militarily" in South Vietnam.[56]

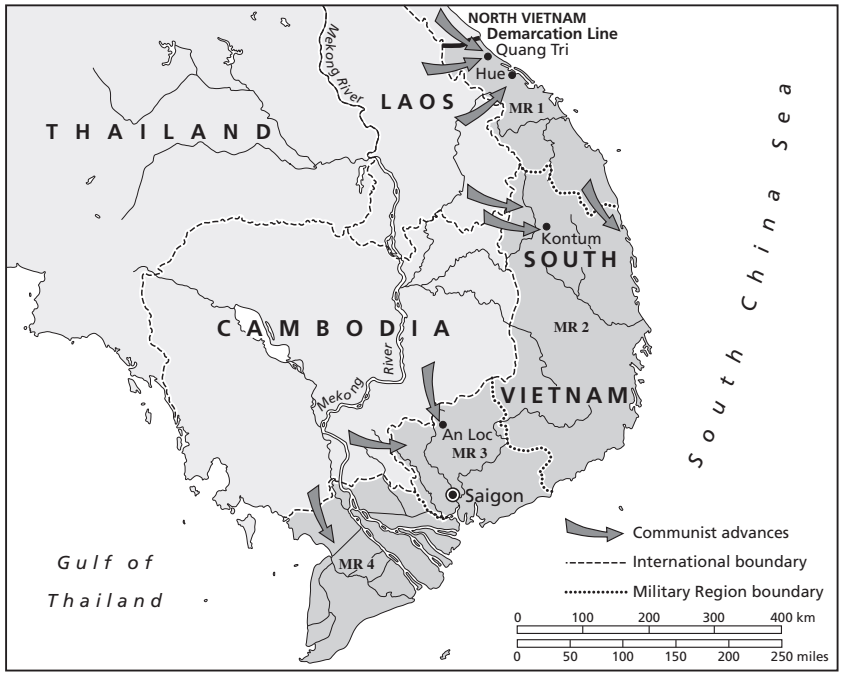
These considerations certainly influenced Hanoi. However, orthodox commentators slight or even ignore the progress achieved by Vietnamization as a factor in North Vietnamese decision making. This is true even when Vietnamization is mentioned as something Hanoi wanted to reverse. One orthodox historian who does consider Vietnamization as a factor in Hanoi's decision making is William S. Turley. He cites a memo Le Duc Tho wrote to Communist commanders in South Vietnam in late March 1972, just days before the start of the Easter Offensive. Tho's overriding concern was to force a settlement of the war before Nixon's reelection, and he told his commanders this meant it was necessary "to basically defeat Vietnamization." Turley adds, "Tho did not say Vietnamization was succeeding, but reversing its progress clearly was a major objective."[57]

Vietnamization's successes made reversing it an urgent objective, and this in turn led Hanoi not only to change its strategy and launch a conventional invasion of South Vietnam but to do it sooner rather than later. Willbanks notes that in 1971 the North Vietnamese Politburo debated when to launch the invasion. Some members favored a delay until 1973, when most US troops would be gone. However, Le Duan and others argued for 1972, citing the progress of Vietnamization with regard to both the growing strength of the ARVN and pacification. They warned that delay would make it much more difficult to conquer South Vietnam militarily. Le Duan's argument carried the day.[58] While Le Duan's assessment of the situation in South Vietnam was hardly the same as Sorley's – he and his supporters obviously did not believe the United States and South Vietnam had won the war – what he told the Politburo at a minimum lends considerable credence to Sorley's case for the success Vietnamization. So does an assessment provided by Sir Robert

[56] See, for example, Herring, *America's Longest War*, 304; Moss, *Vietnam: An American Ordeal*, 369; John Prados, *Vietnam: History of an Unwinnable War*, 448–49; Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 291–92. Also see Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 223–24.

[57] Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 183–85.

[58] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 125–26. Willbanks bases his summary of this Politburo debate on two sources: David W. P. Elliott, *NLF-DRV Strategy and the 1972 Spring Offensive* (Ithaca: Cornell University, International Relations Project of East Asia, IREA Project, January 1974); and Ilya V. Gaiduk, *The Soviet Union and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Iran R. Dee, 1996). See also Andrade and Willbanks, "CORDS/Pheonix," 22.



MAP 8 The Easter Offensive, 1972

Thompson. Shortly after the Easter Offensive, Thompson told a conference audience in the United States: "The result of successful Vietnamization and pacification was that by 1971 the North decided that the only thing left was to invade."[59]

"THE TEST PASSED"

"The Test Passed" is William Colby's lapidary assessment of how South Vietnam dealt with the crisis it faced during the spring and summer of 1972.[60] On March 30, 1972, North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam. Hanoi's goal was to strike a devastating blow against the South Vietnamese regime that would wreck Nixon's policies and force him to negotiate a settlement on Hanoi's terms. A successful invasion might

[59] Quoted in Sorley, *A Better War*, 306. On Thompson see W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 103.
[60] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 314.

even cause the Thieu government to collapse. This was not infiltration, as in the past, but rather an outright full-scale invasion by a conventional army, almost the entire North Vietnamese army in fact. More than 130,000 troops, the elite of PAVN's combat forces, were thrown into battle, their numbers swelled by thousands of guerrillas. They were equipped with 1,200 tanks and armored vehicles, heavy artillery, modern surface-to-air missiles, heat-seeking antiaircraft missiles, and other state-of-the-art weaponry. This equipment had been supplied by the Soviet Union and China, mostly the former; this invasion could not have taken place without Soviet help. The invasion was three pronged: four divisions attacking across the demilitarized zone in the north, two more pushing east from Laos into the Central Highlands, and three more divisions attacking eastward from Cambodia in the south. Altogether, fourteen PAVN divisions and more than twenty-six additional regiments units participated in the operation.[61]

The ground fighting was fierce and lasted into the summer, with the ultimate outcome very much in doubt at various points. It is widely agreed that Nixon's decision to provide massive US air support to the beleaguered South Vietnamese, including bombing by B-52s, was decisive in turning the tide. For example, US fighter-bombers and B-52s were critical in enabling ARVN forces to resist and eventually repel two key sieges, one at An Loc, about sixty-five miles from Saigon, in the south and the other at the city of Kontum, in the center of the country. American advisors to ARVN also played a critical role in the ground war, at times taking de facto command of units they supposedly were only advising. Beginning in early May the use of airpower included resumed attacks against North Vietnam, but, crucially, without many of the restrictions imposed by Johnson on Rolling Thunder. This time the bombing campaign, called Linebacker, was designed to cripple North Vietnam's ability to wage war. Haiphong and ports were mined so that no ships could enter or leave, and roads and rail lines linking North Vietnam to China were hit. North Vietnam was almost entirely cut off from its Soviet and Chinese suppliers. Factories and power stations were destroyed. The accuracy of the bombing was dramatically increased by newly developed precision weapons such as laser-guided bombs. Management of the campaign, unlike under Rolling Thunder, was turned over to military commanders. For some of the men who fought in the war and later wrote about it, this important change finally

[61] Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 127–28; Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 186.

provided some satisfaction. Thus General Davidson noted, "No more would the president and secretary of defense – military neophytes – pore over target maps and bomb tonnages."[62] Or, as General Dave Richard Palmer laconically summed things up, "Linebacker was not Rolling Thunder – it was war."[63]

The Easter Offensive met its final defeat in September 1972 when ARVN forces completed their recapture of Quang Tri City, capital of South Vietnam's northernmost province, which PAVN forces had overrun in the first days of the invasion. By then the North Vietnamese had suffered about 100,000 killed and lost at least half of their tanks and large artillery. Many units were almost entirely wiped out. South Vietnamese losses, while considerably less, were still staggering: at least 25,000 killed and three times that number wounded. Not incidentally, as the fighting was slowing drawing to a close in late August, the last US combat troops in South Vietnam boarded a plane for home.

Orthodox commentators generally agree that the Easter Offensive demonstrated the futility of Vietnamization. The ARVN may have repelled the attack, they argue, but only because of American support both on the ground and in the air. South Vietnamese failings, both governmental and military, were still very much in evidence. To make matters worse, even in defeat the North Vietnamese had seized and retained a strategic strip of territory along the Laotian and Cambodian borders extending approximately from the DMZ to the northern part of the Mekong Delta; in 1975 it would provide key jumping-off points for a new invasion. Hanoi also still had tens of thousands of troops inside South Vietnam.

Revisionists vary in assessing the Easter Offensive, including what it revealed about Vietnamization. Summers calls the offensive "disastrous" for Hanoi; at the same time, comparing the Easter Offensive to Tet, he says that as with Tet, the Easter Offensive, while a "tactical failure," nonetheless was a "strategic success" because it eroded American will.[64] Davidson argues that the ARVN's victory over the North Vietnamese, while important and even heroic in many ways, also demonstrates South Vietnam's excessive dependence on US military support and that, in the

[62] Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 704. After a second bombing campaign in December 1972, the bombing of North Vietnam during the Easter Offensive was called Linebacker I. The December 1972 campaign became Linebacker II.
[63] Dave Richard Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet*, 321.
[64] Summers, *On Strategy*, 156–57, 184–85.

end, too many of "the same old faults were there, too." To Davidson, the Easter Offensive was "a stern test for Vietnamization," not the "complete test." That test, the "real trial of Vietnamization," came after America's complete withdrawal from Vietnam.[65] Andrade agrees with Davidson about the problem of South Vietnamese dependence on the United States, noting that the US/ARVN "partnership" could work, "but only as long as American firepower remained abundantly available."[66] Cecil Curry likewise notes the offensive showed that Vietnamization "seemed as if it would not work unless backed by American air support," although he adds that for North Vietnam, even combined with the new territory the PAVN now held, this revelation "was little enough reward in the face of such a serious reversal."[67]

Colby and Sorley make the most positive revisionist case for Vietnamization in the wake of the Easter Offensive. Colby notes that during the offensive, virtually no guerrilla assaults took place in most of South Vietnam, including the heavily populated Mekong Delta and coastal regions, a tribute to the success of pacification. He points out that despite the initial North Vietnamese successes after attacking across the demilitarized zone, the ARVN managed to reform its defenses, stop the PAVN advance, and save the city of Hue. Colby assigns much of the credit for this to Ngo Quang Troung, the general Davidson calls South Vietnam's "finest combat soldier," who in early May 1972 was put in charge of defending Hue by President Thieu.[68] Colby points out that it was possible for Thieu to move an elite division from its position in the Mekong Delta region south of Saigon to an area north of the capital to face the invading PAVN because Communist guerrillas in the area were capable of nothing more than "marginal harassment," which could be handled by local territorial forces. Pacification had accomplished its mission. Colby

[65] Davidson, *Vietnam at* War, 711–12.

[66] Dale Andrade, *America's Last Vietnam Battle: Halting Hanoi's 1972 Easter Offensive* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 487–88.

[67] Curry, *Victory at Any Cost*, 288. Curry notes that Giap had opposed the offensive yet was blamed for its failure and removed as commander of PAVN, the army he had built. As Curry puts it, in effect explaining a key aspect of how North Vietnam's political system worked: "He [Giap] had been right. That was enough to condemn him."

[68] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 319; Davidson, *Vietnam at War*, 685. For General Troung's assessment of the Easter Offensive see Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Troung, *The Easter Offensive of 1972* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980), especially pages 175–81. Davidson adds that Troung "could have commanded a division or corps in any army in the world."

assigns due credit to American airpower, advisors, logistical support, intelligence, and more. But in the end, he insists, the South Vietnamese had borne the brunt of the ground fighting. They had defended Hue, repulsed the North Vietnamese in the central highlands, and defeated the attack on Saigon. "A free Vietnam had proven that it had the will and the capability of defend itself with the assistance, but not the participation of its American ally" against an enemy backed by the Soviet Union and China. For these reasons, Colby insists, "On the ground in South Vietnam, the war had been won."[69]

Sorley makes essentially the same case as Colby. To Sorley, what is "most important of all" about the Easter Offensive is the way the ARVN fought. He admits that the ARVN still had problems but insists that negative accounts of its performance by critics have obscured the fact that by 1972 it had become "a professional, agile, and determined military shield for its country." Sorley quotes Douglas Pike's assessment that "ARVN troops and even local forces stood and fought as never before." He quotes General Abrams's statement to his commanders that while US airpower was critical, "the thing that had to happen before that is the Vietnamese, some numbers of them, had to stand and fight. If they didn't do that, ten times the air [power] we've got wouldn't have stopped them [the North Vietnamese]." Sorley writes that "evidence abounds" for the ARVN's effectiveness in its battlefield performance during 1972: he adds, "South Vietnam did, with courage and blood, defeat the enemy's 1972 Easter Offensive." The point had been reached where "the war was won."[70]

To keep the war won, Sorley argues, the United States had to continue providing substantial help to South Vietnam. Unlike orthodox and even some revisionist critics of ARVN, Sorley maintains that this was not unreasonable, as it was exactly what the United States had done (and in 1972 was still doing) for West Germany and South Korea. Sorley reminds his readers, and ARVN's critics, that with the start of the Cold War, West Germany was incapable of defending itself against Soviet aggression without American help; in northeast Asia, after the armistice ended the fighting in 1953, South Korea needed US help against the continued threat from North Korea. Therefore, about 300,000 US troops remained in West Germany and 50,000 in South Korea. In 1973, having signed the Paris Peace Accords and withdrawn all US troops from Vietnam, the Nixon

[69] Colby, *Lost Victory*, 320–21.
[70] Sorley, "Reassessing ARVN," 13–14; Sorley, "The Conduct of the War," 191.

administration made a series of commitments to the South Vietnamese government for continued support in the event of renewed North Vietnamese aggression. When that aggression materialized, the United States "defaulted" on those commitments. And that, says Sorley, is the reason the war was "no longer won."[71] How this happened is the topic of the following chapter.

[71] Ibid.; Sorley, "Could the War Have Been Won?" 417. See also Sorley, "Courage and Blood: South Vietnam's Repulse of the 1972 Easter Offensive," *Parameters: The US Army War College Quarterly*, Summer 1999: 38–56. Actually, about 250,000 US troops were stationed in West Germany from the mid-1950s until the end of the Cold War. See Tim Kane, "Global US Troop Deployment, 1950–2003," Heritage Foundation, Center for Data Analysis Report #06-02 on National Security and Defense. Available online at www.heritage.org/research/reports/2006/05/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2005