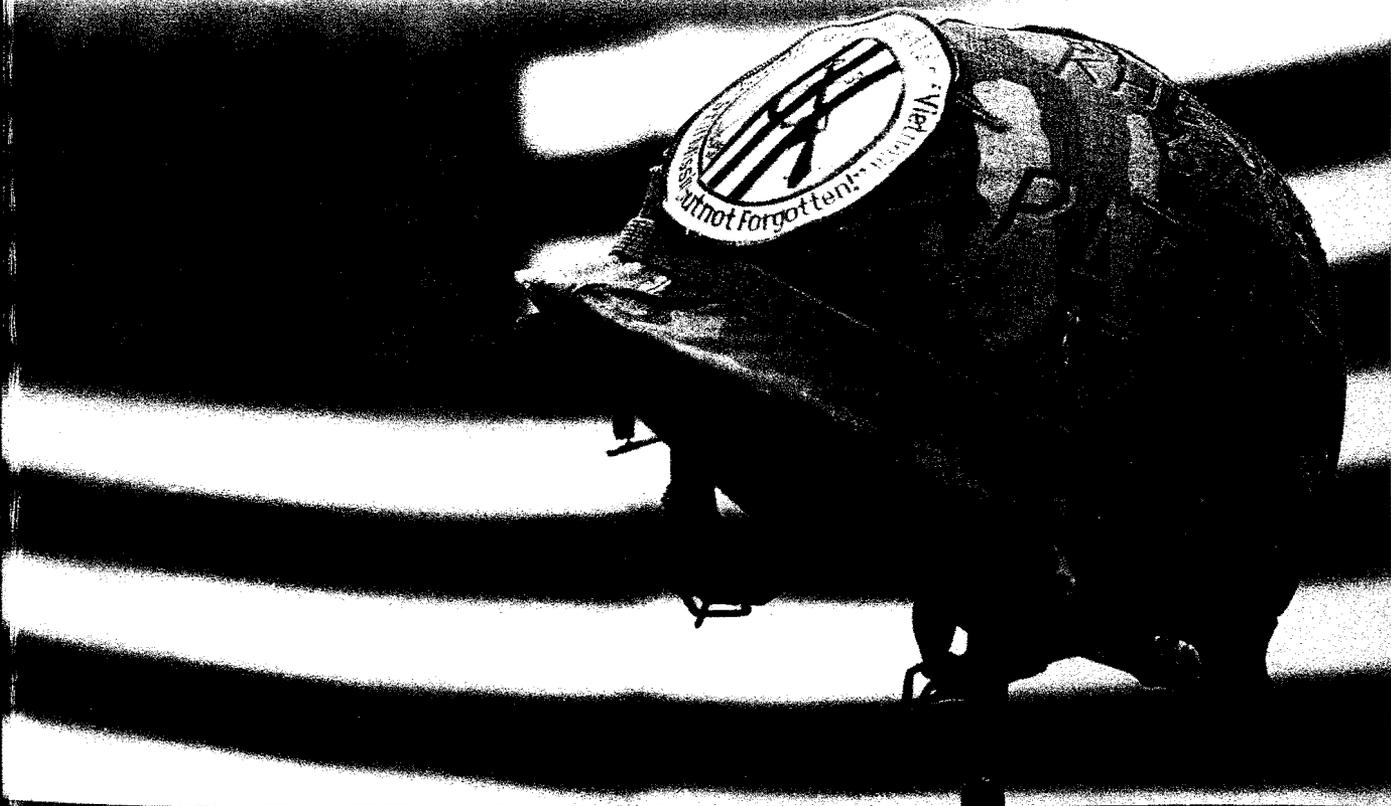


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The 1972 election ended up being the last hurrah for the anti-war movement, and some said the '60s truly ended then. In any event, Richard Nixon certainly ended his career that year. It just took two more years to convince him of it.

Laos and the Uneasy Calm

After the fiasco of the Cambodian invasion, Vietnamization continued as planned. Nixon still worried about safe havens for the North Vietnamese in both Cambodia and Laos, and even contemplated a new, more forceful invasion of Cambodia. General Abrams opposed it, preferring more harassment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. "Harassment" ended up being an invasion of Laos, but Nixon would not repeat his 1970 mistakes in Cambodia.

Codenamed Lam Son 719, the 1971 ARVN invasion of Laos was named after the village of a fifteenth-century Vietnamese freedom fighter against the Chinese. Nearly all of the Laos invading force in early 1971 would consist of ARVN troops. The United States provided air cover. But the North Vietnamese did not pull back as they did in Cambodia. The Laos sanctuaries were vital to the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the entire war in South Vietnam.

Bad weather bogged down the ARVN advance, and the North Vietnamese refused to budge. Without the U.S. Air Force, the campaign would have been an utter disaster. Facing heavy casualties, President Thieu ordered a halt to the invasion, and in Washington, the political spinning began.



ASK SAIGON SALLY

LIFE magazine had sent a camera team into battle with the invading ARVN. One of their prize-winning photographers, Larry Burrows, was one of four American news photographers killed during the Laos invasion. He had been covering Vietnam events since the 1950s, and is considered the war's greatest combat photographer. *LIFE* reported the invasion as the worst fighting of the war. Vietnamization, they said, had a long way to go, and they doubted that the South Vietnamese had much interest in it anyway.

On national television, Nixon claimed the Laos invasion was a total success, and a beautiful example of Vietnamization in action. A little over 1,000 ARVN troops had been killed, the White House claimed. But the Pentagon knew better. The real estimate was closer to 8,000, and the American people had heard this kind of stuff before. If the Laos invasion had been such a success, why did the ARVN retreat?

Why did they look like a defeated army? These types of questions remained as politically inappropriate as always, and, of course, were never answered by the Nixon administration.

To Hanoi, the Laos invasion was something of a learning experience. The North Vietnamese government had been afraid of the growing ARVN with its fancy, U.S.-supplied hardware. In Laos, they learned that big numbers of ARVN could be defeated as easily as small numbers. They also found it interesting that during an important invasion, the United States now stayed in the air and avoided the use of ground troops. Nixon was running scared, they concluded, and Vietnamization did mean America was leaving the war behind.

In the meantime, the Nixon administration, including Henry Kissinger, did its best to convince the American people that all was well in South Vietnam. President Thieu, Nixon said, was “loved” by Democrats everywhere in the country, and the ARVN was on the verge of becoming the most significant military force on the planet next to the U.S. armed forces. During the spring of 1971, this type of rhetoric was consistent and constant. It was even soothing to some Americans who wanted to believe that a certain calm was settling over South Vietnam. But nothing was calm, and privately, a deeply concerned Nixon was at a loss over what to do next.



TALES FROM THE FRONT

Major General Robert Molinelli served two tours of duty in Vietnam, the second of them during Lam Son 719 (the 1971 U.S. and ARVN invasion of Laos). A highly decorated helicopter commander, Molinelli lost over 60 of his 100 helicopters during Lam Son 719. At one point in the battle, he identified Soviet military advisors in action against both American and ARVN troops. He was denied permission to fire on them, and for years insisted on an official explanation from Washington on the issue.

Daniel Ellsberg Feels Your Pain

Interrupting the supposed calm was the revelation that the entire Vietnam War had been the product of bizarre policymaking. The revelation came in the form of historical summaries of top secret documents—nicknamed “the Pentagon Papers” by the press—detailing the origins of America’s role in Vietnam. In 1967, Secretary of Defense McNamara had ordered that a secret history of the Vietnam War be put together. Apparently this documented study was supposed to be turned over to