

**VIETNAMIZATION, U.S. ADVISORS,  
AND THE 1972 EASTER OFFENSIVE**

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by

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On 20 January 1969, Richard Milhous Nixon was inaugurated as the 37<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. During his campaign, Nixon had made the war in Vietnam a major element of his platform, promising “new leadership that will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific.”<sup>1</sup> He had proclaimed: “The nation’s objective should be to help the South Vietnamese fight the war and not fight it for them....If they do not assume the majority of the burden in their own defense, they cannot be saved.”<sup>2</sup>

It was evident that Nixon faced a serious dilemma. He was not prepared to unilaterally withdraw and award South Vietnam to the Communists, but he had also promised to end the war and bring the troops home. As Henry Kissinger subsequently observed in his memoirs:

The Nixon Administration entered office determined to end our involvement in Vietnam. But it soon came up against the reality that had also bedeviled its predecessor. For nearly a generation the security and progress of free peoples had depended on confidence in America. We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel.<sup>3</sup>

The new president had to devise a strategy to get the U.S. out of Vietnam, without “simply walk[ing] away.” While the survival of South Vietnam remained an objective, it manifestly was not the prime goal, which was to get the U.S. out of Vietnam. Nixon and his advisers began to consider how the U.S. could disengage itself from the conflict and at the same time give the South Vietnamese at least a chance of survival after the American departure. It was acknowledged that this would not be easy and might even prove impossible in the long run.

Despite the uncertainty involved in trying to strengthen the South Vietnamese armed forces, the President and his closest advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers, realized that this was the only feasible course of action if the United States was ever to escape from Vietnam. Nixon ordered American representatives to take a “highly forceful approach” to cause President Thieu and the South Vietnamese Government to assume greater responsibility for the war.<sup>4</sup> Unspoken, but still clear to all involved, was the implication that an assumption of greater combat responsibility by the RVNAF would precede a resultant withdrawal of American forces, which by this time totaled 543,000.

To get a better feel for the situation on the ground in Southeast Asia, Nixon directed Laird to go to South Vietnam to make a first-hand assessment. On 5 March 1969, the Secretary of Defense, accompanied by General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, arrived in Saigon where they were briefed by senior MACV officers, who emphasized the view that significant improvements were being made in the South Vietnamese armed forces. Laird instructed General Abrams to speed up the program for turning over the bulk of the war effort to the Saigon forces. Abrams reiterated his original warning that the South Vietnamese could not stand alone against a combined threat. Nevertheless, Laird, citing political pressures at home, directed Abrams to prepare plans to put the new policy into action "before the time given the new administration runs out...probably with[in] the next three or four months."<sup>5</sup>

Laird returned to Washington convinced that the South Vietnamese could eventually take over prosecution of the entire war, thus permitting a complete U.S. withdrawal, despite Abrams' warning and the contrary recommendations of his own staff. A Republican Congressman with seventeen years in the House, Laird had been chosen by Nixon because he knew Congress and was well respected on both sides of the aisle. Laird was anxious to end the war because he realized the traditional grace period afforded a new president by the public, the press, and Congress following his election victory would be short-lived. Anti-war sentiment on Capitol Hill was growing and Laird knew that Nixon would feel the brunt if he did not end the war quickly. Moreover, if the war in Vietnam continued much longer, Laird reasoned that it would weaken American strength and credibility around the world in places far more important to U.S. security than Southeast Asia. He believed that any effort to prolong the conflict would lead to such strife and controversy that it would seriously damage Nixon's ability to achieve an honorable settlement. Therefore, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Jerry Friedheim, Laird was "more interested in ending the war in Vietnam rather than winning it."<sup>6</sup>

On 13 March, Laird reported the findings from his trip in a memorandum to the new president. He was convinced that Nixon had no choice but to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese in order to extricate U.S. forces and placate both the resurgent anti-war movement and Americans who just wanted the war to go away. He proposed a plan designed to make the South Vietnamese armed

forces capable of dealing not only with the on-going insurgency, but also with a continuing North Vietnamese presence in the south. He disagreed with Abrams that U.S. withdrawals had to be tied to commensurate Communist withdrawals and argued that the large U.S. effort stifled South Vietnamese initiative and prevented them from getting on with taking over the war effort. He felt that the “orientation” of American senior commanders in Vietnam “seems to be more on operations than on assisting the South Vietnamese to acquire the means to defend themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Laird wanted the senior U.S. military leaders in South Vietnam to get to work on shifting their focus from fighting the war to preparing the South Vietnamese to stand on their own. Accordingly, he recommended withdrawing 50,000-70,000 American troops in 1969.

In a National Security Council meeting on 28 March, the president and his advisers discussed Laird’s recommendations. In attendance was General Andrew Goodpaster, then serving as General Abrams’ deputy in Saigon. He reported to the president that substantial improvement in the South Vietnamese forces had already been made and that MACV was in fact close to “de-Americanizing” the war. According to Henry Kissinger, Laird took exception to Goodpaster’s choice of words and suggested that what was needed was a term like “Vietnamization” to put the emphasis on the right issues. In very short time, this term was adopted as the embodiment of Nixon’s efforts to turn over the war to the South Vietnamese.<sup>8</sup>

Laird later described the objective of the new program before the House Armed Services Committee as “the effective assumption by the RVNAF of a larger share of combat operations from American forces” so that “U.S. forces can be in fact withdrawn in substantial numbers.”<sup>9</sup> Such statements were clearly aimed at selling the new policy to Congress and the American public. Alexander M. Haig, then a member of Nixon’s National Security staff, later described Laird’s plan as a “stroke of public relations genius,” but pointed out that it was “a program designed to mollify American critics of the war, not a policy for the effective defense of South Vietnam.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Laird, according to Kissinger, had convinced himself that Vietnamization would work and it became his top priority.

Nixon was quickly won over by Laird’s arguments and later wrote, “It was on the basis of Laird’s enthusiastic advocacy that we undertook the policy of Vietnamization.”<sup>11</sup> It may not have taken very much to convince the President to endorse this approach. Alexander Haig maintains that Nixon

had begun talking about troop withdrawals shortly after his inauguration and Laird's Vietnamization plan provided the answer he was looking for.<sup>12</sup> Vietnamization would enable the President to initiate a phase-down of combat operations by U.S. troops with the ultimate goal of complete withdrawal. However, he realized that American forces could not be pulled out precipitously. Although the situation was improving in South Vietnam, there was still a significant level of fighting. Time was needed to make the RVNAF sufficiently strong to continue the fighting alone. Thus, American forces would have to continue combat operations to gain the necessary time to build up the South Vietnamese forces.

In early April 1969, Nixon set forth planning guidance for the new policy in National Security Study Memorandum 36 (NSSM 36), which directed "the preparation of a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war" that would address "all aspects of U.S. military, para-military, and civilian involvement in Vietnam, including combat and combat support forces, advisory personnel, and all forms of equipment."<sup>13</sup> The stated objective of the requested plan was "the progressive transfer...of the fighting effort" from American to South Vietnamese forces.

Nixon's directive was based on a number of assumptions. First, it was assumed that, lacking progress in the Paris peace talks, any U.S. withdrawal would be unilateral and that there would not be any comparable NVA reductions. This was a significant change from previous assumptions, because it meant that the South Vietnamese would have to take on both the NVA and the VC. Secondly, the U.S. withdrawals would be on a "cut and try" basis, and General Abrams would have to make periodic assessments of their effects before launching the next phase of troop reductions. Thirdly, it was assumed that the South Vietnamese forces would willingly assume more military responsibility for the war. Based on these three assumptions, the American troop presence in South Vietnam was to be reduced by phased troop withdrawals eventually to the point that only a support and advisory mission remained.

Thus, the Nixon administration, despite assessments from a wide range of government agencies that agreed that the RVNAF could never combat a combined VC-NVA threat, developed a plan to prepare the South Vietnamese to do just that, instructing the American command in Saigon to develop plans for turning over the entire ground war effort to Saigon. All that was left to institute the new strategy was a public announcement.

On 8 June 1969, President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu at

Midway and publicly proclaimed for the first time the new American policy of “Vietnamization.” Nixon stated that there would be a steady buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while American troops were gradually withdrawn. The ultimate objective was to strengthen ARVN capabilities and bolster the Thieu government such that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the Communists. Nixon announced that he was pulling out 25,000 troops and that at “regular intervals” thereafter, he would pull out more. According to the President, this withdrawal of U.S. forces was contingent on three factors: 1) the progress in training and equipping the South Vietnamese forces, 2) progress in the Paris negotiations, and 3) the level of enemy activity.<sup>14</sup>

Privately, President Thieu was not pleased with the American president’s announcement. According to Nixon, Thieu, realizing what the end state of U.S. withdrawals meant, was “deeply troubled,” but Nixon later claimed he “privately assured him [Thieu] through Ambassador [Ellsworth] Bunker that our support for him was steadfast.”<sup>15</sup> Thieu and many of his generals were upset with another aspect of “Vietnamization” and that was the word itself. The South Vietnamese leaders took exception to the whole concept and the connotation that the ARVN were “finally” stepping up to assume responsibility for the war. To the South Vietnamese who had been fighting the Communists since the 1950's, the idea that the war would now be “Vietnamized” was insulting. As one former ARVN general wrote after the war, “It was after all our own war, and we were determined to fight it, with or without American troops. In my opinion, Vietnamization was not a proper term to be used in Vietnam, especially when propaganda was an important enemy weapon.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite the sensitivities of the South Vietnamese, Henry Kissinger recorded that “Nixon was jubilant. He considered the announcement a political triumph. He thought that it would buy him the time necessary for developing our strategy.”<sup>17</sup> A later memorandum revealed that Nixon hoped that his new policy of Vietnamizing the war would demonstrate to the American people that he “had ruled out a purely U.S. solution to the problem in South Vietnam and indeed had a plan to end the war.”<sup>18</sup>

In order to solidify the new strategy, Nixon met with Laird and General Wheeler upon his return from Midway. The purpose was to discuss a mission change for General Abrams and MACV. The current mission statement, which had been issued by President Johnson, was to “defeat” the enemy and “force” his withdrawal to North Vietnam. As a result of the discussions following the Midway

announcement, a new order to Abrams that would go into effect on August 15 charged him to provide "maximum assistance" to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam, to increase the support to the pacification effort, and to reduce the flow of supplies to the enemy down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. With this order, the entire thrust of U.S. efforts in South Vietnam changed. Nixon's new strategy hinged on Vietnamizing the war, while Henry Kissinger worked behind the scenes in Paris in an attempt to forge a cease-fire and subsequent peace agreement. Thus, Nixon hoped to extricate the United States from Southeast Asia and achieve "peace with honor."

The Vietnamization effort would be implemented in three phases. In the first phase, responsibility for the bulk of the ground combat against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces would be turned over gradually to the RVNAF. During this phase, the U.S. would continue to provide air, naval, and logistics support. The second phase consisted of developing capabilities in the RVNAF to help them achieve self-reliance. This involved an increase in artillery, air, naval assets and other support activities. The second phase proceeded simultaneously with the first phase, but it would require more time. Even after the bulk of U.S. combat forces were withdrawn, U.S. forces would continue to provide support, security, and training personnel. The third phase involved the reduction of the American presence to strictly a military advisory role with a small security element remaining for protection. It was planned that the advisory and assistance presence would be gradually reduced as South Vietnam grew in strength, but the new strategy, as least as it was described initially, always included leaving a small residual force in South Vietnam "for some time to come," as Laird told a House Subcommittee in February 1970.<sup>19</sup>

The South Vietnamese took statements such as this and many more like it as evidence of a promise that the United States would not desert them. As the cries for complete U.S. withdrawal increased in volume, the idea of a residual U.S. force would eventually be abandoned and this change would have a devastating impact on the fortunes of South Vietnam.

While the U.S. continued to conduct combat operations with American forces, the new Vietnamization policy focused initially on modernizing and developing the South Vietnamese armed forces. This effort was not a new initiative, but during the earlier years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam it had been of secondary importance as U.S. military leaders focused on the conduct of operations by American units in the field. With the election of Richard Nixon and his subsequent emphasis on

Vietnamization, the effort to strengthen and modernize the South Vietnamese forces became a top priority for MACV.<sup>20</sup>

With the initial guidance provided in National Security Study Memorandum 36 and the official announcement of Vietnamization at Midway in June, 1969, President Nixon made it very clear that he wanted the war turned over to the South and as quickly as possible. To do this, military planners focused on three areas to improve the RVNAF combat capability. The first two, increasing the size of the force and providing modern weapons and equipment proved easier than the third, which involved upgrading the quality and capabilities of the South Vietnamese fighting force in the field.

In April 1970, the Joint Chiefs of Staff submitted a plan, which became known as the Consolidated RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Plan, or CRIMP. This plan, which covered the 1970-72 fiscal years, raised the total supported South Vietnamese military force structure to an even 1.1 million. Laird approved the first two years of the plan, but deferred approval of the remainder until he had a better assessment of the long-range military situation in South Vietnam and the financial situation in the United States.

CRIMP had a significant impact on the entire RVNAF, but, as in the past, the ARVN got the largest share of the improvements. Under this plan, the ARVN eventually received 155-mm and 175-mm long range artillery pieces, M-42 and M-55 antiaircraft weapons, M-48 tanks, and a host of other sophisticated equipment and weapons systems. By the end of 1969, the U.S. had supplied 1,200 tanks and armored vehicles, 30,000 machine guns, 4,000 mortars, 20,000 radios, and 25,000 jeeps and trucks. The new equipment and weapons received in the two years following the approval of CRIMP enabled the ARVN to activate an additional division (3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division), as well as a number of smaller units, to include twenty-five border ranger battalions, numerous artillery battalions, four armored cavalry squadrons, three tank battalions, two armored brigade headquarters, and three anti-aircraft battalions. By the beginning of 1972, the South Vietnamese army strength would increase to 450,000 and consist of 171 infantry battalions, 58 artillery battalions, 22 armored cavalry and tank squadrons, and 60 artillery battalions.

The regular forces benefitted greatly from CRIMP, but so, too, did the territorial Regional and Popular Forces. As Vietnamization gained momentum, MACV and Washington planned to fill the gaps left by departing U.S. divisions with an expansion of the RF/PF, who would hopefully be able to take

over the major share of territorial security and support of the pacification program. This expansion effort involved a significant increase in numbers and improved equipment. Under CRIMP, the RF and PF received newer, more modern weapons, including M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns, and M-79 grenade launchers, all of which were vast improvements over the hodge-podge of older cast-off weapons with which they previously had been armed. The influx of 105-mm howitzers enabled the Joint General Staff to activate eventually a total of 174 territorial artillery sections to provide support for the RF, PF, and border ranger forces. This was significant in that it vastly improved the fire support available to the territorial forces, while reducing the burden on the regular artillery forces, who could then focus on supporting the regular maneuver battalions in their combat operations. In addition to the new equipment, the manpower strength of the Regional and Popular Forces was increased in an attempt to get more government troops into the countryside to support the pacification effort. The command structure of the Regional Forces was improved and several RF Group Commands were formed.

The Vietnamese Air Force also benefitted greatly under CRIMP, growing from 17,000 in late 1968 to 37,000 by the end of 1969, and ultimately to 64,000 by 1973. Along with this increase in the number of personnel, there was also a significant upgrade in aircraft and command and control capability. In 1969, all VNAF air wings were reorganized into divisions with one supporting each of the four ARVN Corps plus an additional one at Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon. In 1968, the VNAF's older propeller-driven aircraft began to be replaced by A-37 and F-5A jet fighter-bombers, thus vastly increasing VNAF ground support capability. Its cargo hauling capability was also improved with the upgrading of the C-47 fleet to C-119 aircraft initially, and eventually to C-123 and C-7 aircraft. The helicopter fleet (unlike the U.S. arrangement where most of the troop-carrying and attack helicopters belonged to the Army, VNAF owned all the helicopters in the South Vietnamese inventory) was greatly enlarged and improved as U.S. Army aviation units began to redeploy, turning over their aircraft and equipment to newly activated Vietnamese helicopter squadrons. Late in 1972, as the U.S. prepared for total withdrawal, VNAF, under the provisions of a special program called Enhance Plus, received thirty-two C-130A four-engined cargo planes and additional C-7 cargo planes, F-5A fighter-bombers, and helicopters.

During the Vietnamization period, the Vietnamese Air Force grew to six times its 1964 strength

and, by 1973, operated a total of 1700 aircraft, including over 500 helicopters. By then it had six air divisions, which included a total of ten A-37 fighter-bomber squadrons, three A-1H attack helicopter squadrons, three F-5E fighter-bomber squadrons, seventeen UH-1 helicopter squadrons, four CH-47 helicopter squadrons, ten liaison and observation squadrons, three C-7 squadrons, four AC-47, AC-119, and EC-47 squadrons, and other additional training units. In terms of equipment, VNAF, by the time of the U.S. withdrawal in 1973, would be one of the most powerful air forces in Southeast Asia.

The Vietnamese Navy also underwent significant expansion during the Vietnamization period. The navy numbered only 17,000 in 1968, but it would reach 40,000 by 1972. To increase the capability of the VNN and to meet the goals of the Vietnamization program, MACV instituted two new programs in 1969. The first was called the Accelerated Turnover of Assets (ACTOV) which was designed to rapidly increase naval strength and training and at the same time, accelerate turnover of ships and combat responsibility from the U.S. Navy to the South Vietnamese Navy. The second program was called the Accelerated Turnover of Logistics (ACTOVLOG), which was aimed at increasing naval logistical support capabilities.

The VNN received two small cruisers in May, 1969. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Navy Riverine Force began to turn over its vessels and river patrol responsibilities to the VNN. By mid-1970, over five hundred U.S. brown water navy boats had been transferred to the South Vietnamese. In September of that year, the VNN took over the ships and mission of the Market Time coastal interdiction program. By 1972, the Vietnamese Navy operated a fleet of over 1700 ships and boats of all types, to include sea patrol craft, large cargo ships, coastal and river patrol craft, and amphibious ships.

In terms of increasing ARVNAF personnel strength and providing the South Vietnamese modern equipment, Vietnamization worked. By 1972, South Vietnam had made a quantum leap in terms of modernization and was one of the largest and best equipped military forces in the world.

Unfortunately, however, equipment and sheer numbers were not the only answers to the problems facing South Vietnam, as it prepared to assume ultimate responsibility for the war. To improve the quality of the ARVN force, MACV increasingly placed more emphasis on training and the advisory effort. This was not a new effort since advisers had been in Vietnam since the first U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAGV) was established in 1954. With the

creation of the new Military Assistance Command, Vietnam in February 1962, the advisory structure was increased drastically. However, with the arrival of U.S. combat units, the advisory effort became a lesser priority.

Under Nixon's Vietnamization program, the advisory effort became a new priority as programs were instituted to improve the fighting capability of the RVNAF. U.S. advisers were found in essentially three areas: they advised South Vietnamese combat units, served in the training base, and worked in the province pacification programs.

Headquarters MACV provided the advisory function to the Joint General Staff, the senior headquarters of the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. However, only a part of MACV Headquarters staff personnel actually served in a true advisory capacity. In 1970, only 397 out of 1668 authorized spaces in MACV's fifteen staff agencies were designated officially as "advisers" to the GVN and the JGS.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, as the war continued and more U.S. forces were withdrawn, the MACV staff agencies became increasingly more involved in advisory functions.

Just below the JGS level were four South Vietnamese corps commanders who were responsible for the four corps tactical zones (later, military regions) that comprised South Vietnam (see Map 1). Initially, their U.S. counterparts were the senior U.S. field force commanders in each of the corps tactical zones. In this capacity, the senior U.S. commander was assisted by two deputies. His deputy for Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) was the principal adviser to the ARVN corps commander in the area of pacification and development. Additionally, the senior U.S. commander had another deputy, who served as the senior adviser to the corps commander and was actually the chief of the U.S. Army Advisory Group attached to the ARVN corps headquarters. As such, he and his staff provided assistance, advice, and support to the corps commander and his staff in command, administration, training, combat operations, intelligence, logistics, political warfare, and civil affairs.

Later, as additional U.S. units and the senior American field force headquarters were withdrawn, the advisory structure changed. During 1971-1972, four Regional Assistance Commands were established. The Regional Assistance Commander, usually a U.S. Army major general, replaced the departing field force commanders as the senior adviser to the South Vietnamese corps commander in the respective military region. The mission of the Regional Assistance Commanders was to provide



assistance to the ARVN corps commanders in developing and maintaining an effective military capability by advising and supporting RVNAF military and paramilitary commanders and staffs at all levels in the corps in military operations, training, intelligence, personnel management, and combat support and combat service support activities. To accomplish this, the Regional Assistance Commander had a staff who worked directly with the ARVN corps staff. He also exercised operational control over the subordinate U.S. Army advisory groups and the pacification advisory organizations in the military region. As such, he and his personnel provided advice, assistance, and support at each echelon of South Vietnamese command in planning and executing both combat operations as well as coordinated pacification and development programs within the military region.

Below the senior U.S. adviser in each Military Region, there were two types of advisory teams: province advisory teams and division advisory teams. Each of the forty-four provinces in South Vietnam was headed by the Province Chief, who was usually a South Vietnamese Army or Marine colonel, who supervised the provincial government apparatus and also commanded the provincial Regional and Popular Forces. Under the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program initiated in 1967, an advisory system was established to assist the Province Chiefs in administering the pacification program. The Province Chief's American counterpart was the Province Senior Adviser, who was either military or civilian, depending on the security situation of the respective province. The Province Senior Adviser and his staff were responsible for advising the province chief in civil and military aspects of the South Vietnamese pacification and development programs. The Province Senior Adviser's staff, which was made up of both U.S. military and civilian personnel, was divided into two parts, the first part dealt with area and community development, to include public health and administration, civil affairs, education, agriculture, psychological operations, and logistics. The other part of the staff dealt with plans and operations, and focused on preparing plans and directing military operations of the territorial forces and associated support within the province.

The Province Chief exercised his authority through District Chiefs. In order to provide advice and support to the district chiefs, the Province Senior Adviser supervised the District Senior Advisers, who each had a staff of about eight members (although the actual size in each case depended on the particular situation in that district). The district level advisory teams assisted the District Chief in the military and civil aspects of the pacification and development program. Additionally, the district team

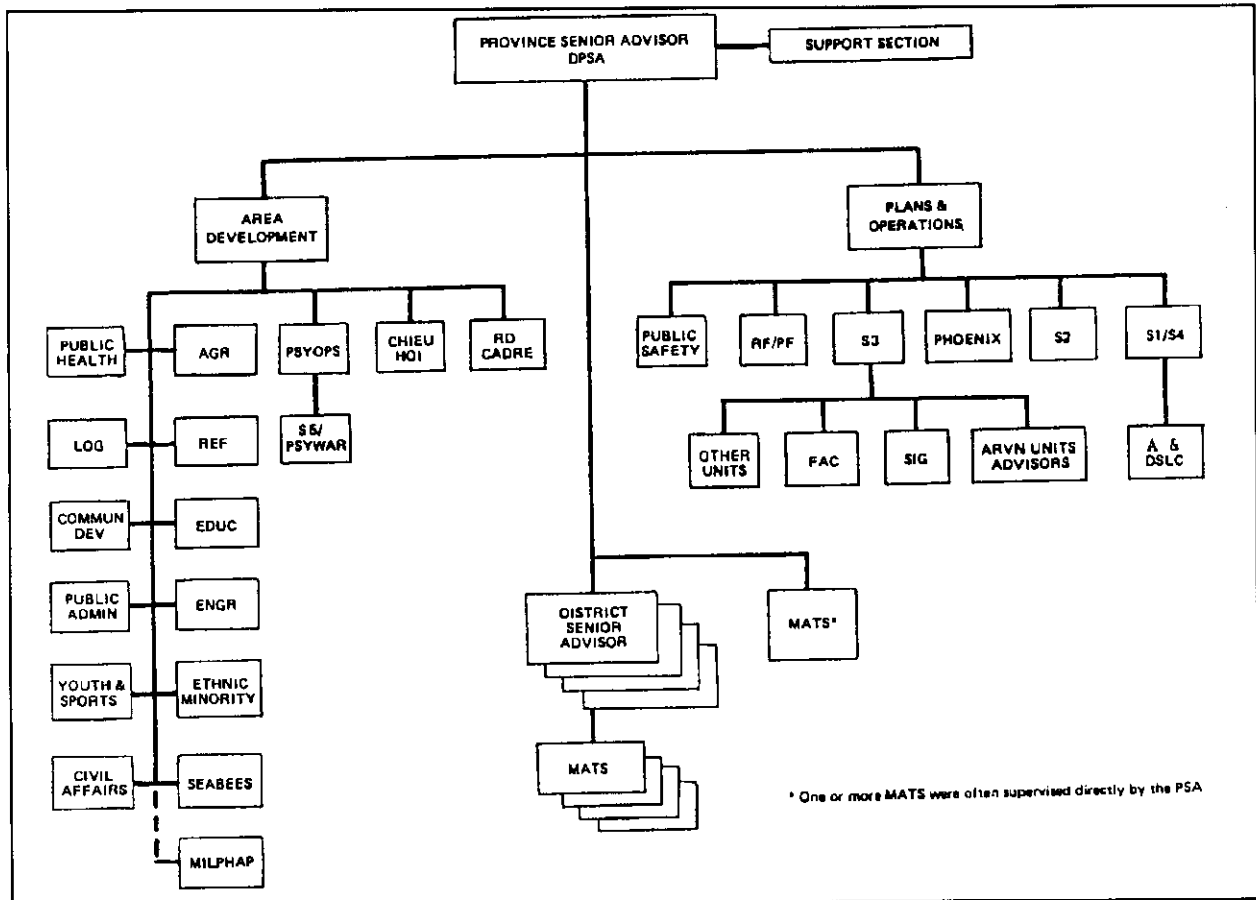
(and/or assigned mobile assistance training teams) advised and trained the Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF) located in the district. By the end of 1967, a total of 4,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel were involved in the CORDS advisory effort. When Vietnamization was officially declared in 1969, total U.S. Army advisory strength stood at about 13,500, half of which were assigned to CORDS organizations.<sup>22</sup> This increase was due to the expansion of the pacification program following the 1968 Tet Offensive. Figure 1 shows the organization of the CORDS team at province level.

In addition to advising CORDS operations, U.S. advisors were also located with the RVNAF regular forces. In January 1969, MACV, in an attempt to upgrade the capability of the regular ARVN divisions, initiated the Combat Assistance Team (CAT) concept. Under this plan, the emphasis was on reducing the number of tactical advisers in the field and changing their mission from “advising to combat support coordination” at the ARVN division level. The Division Combat Assistance Team’s mission was to advise and assist the ARVN division commander and his staff in command, administration, training, tactical operations, intelligence, security, logistics, and certain elements of political warfare. The Division Senior Adviser was usually a U.S. Army colonel, who exercised control over the regimental and battalion advisory teams, which were selectively reduced in strength beginning in 1969 depending on the ARVN division and the level of enemy activity in its respective operating area.<sup>23</sup>

Each ARVN division usually had three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, and several separate battalions, such as the cavalry squadron and the engineer battalion. The regimental advisory teams were normally composed of from eight to twelve U.S. Army personnel (they were eventually reduced in strength as the draw-down of U.S. forces in country gradually reduced the number of advisers assigned). The regimental teams were usually headed by a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel and included various mixes of officers and non-commissioned officers. The separate battalion advisory teams usually consisted of one or two specialists who advised the South Vietnamese in their respective functional areas; e.g. cavalry, intelligence, engineering, etc.

Elite ARVN troops, such as the Airborne and Ranger units, were organized generally along the same lines as regular ARVN units, but the highest echelon of command in these units was the regiment. Each of these regiments was accompanied by an American advisory team, which was headed by a Colonel and was similar, but somewhat larger than those found with the regular ARVN regiments. The

**FIGURE 1 -- PROVINCE ADVISORY TEAM, 1968**

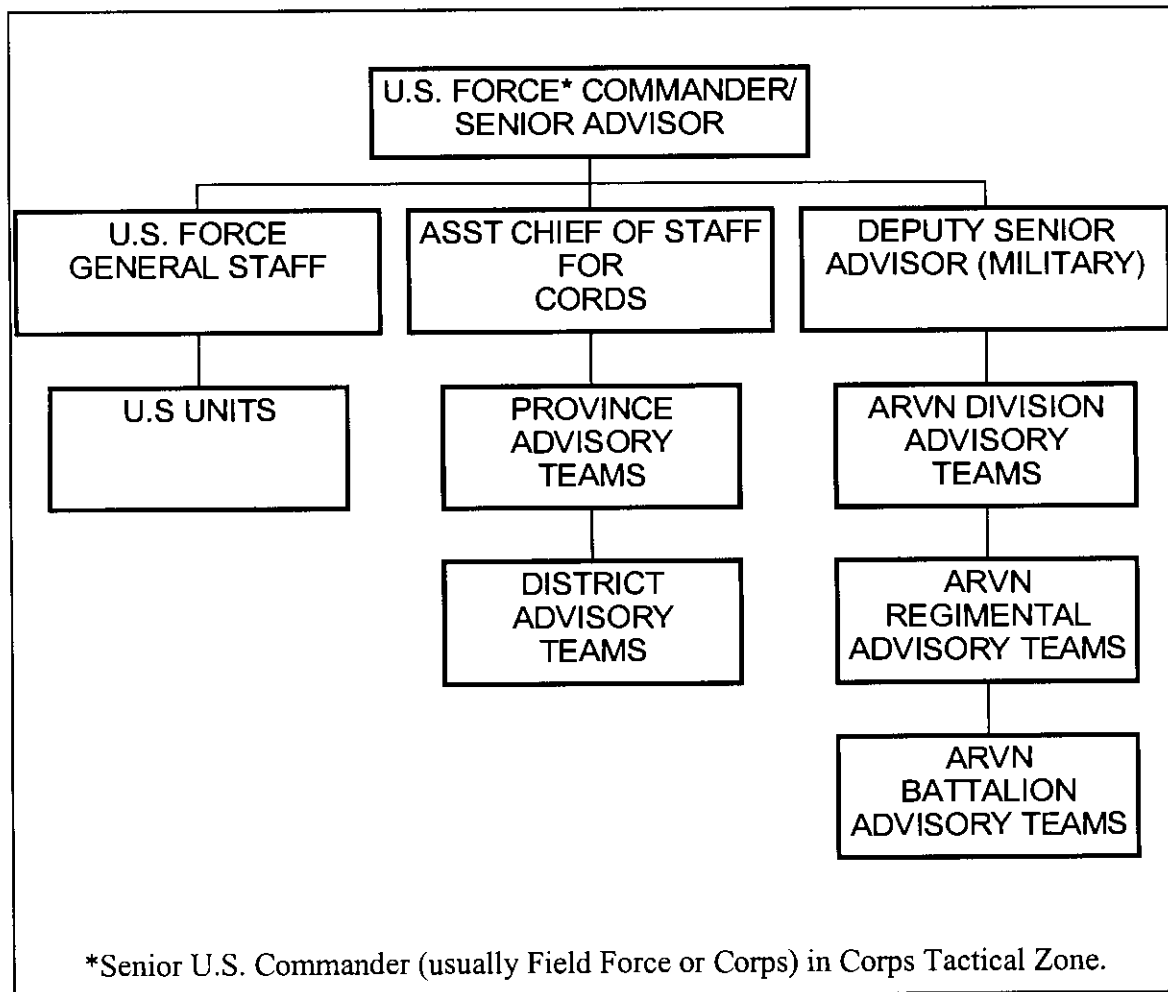


Source: Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 154.

advisory structure for the Vietnamese Marine Corps was similar to the ARVN, but the advisers were U.S. Marine Corps personnel. (Figure 2 depicts the U.S. Advisory Chain of Command effective in 1969-70).

U.S. advisers did not command, nor did they exercise any operational control over any part of the South Vietnamese forces. Their mission was to provide professional military advice and assistance to their counterpart commanders and staffs in personnel management, training, combat operations, intelligence, security, logistics and psychological/civil affairs operations. The idea was that these advisory teams would work themselves out of a job over time as the ARVN and VNMC began to assume more and more responsibility for planning and executing their own operations. However, as

**FIGURE 2 — U.S. ADVISORY CHAIN OF COMMAND, 1969-1970**



Source: Cao Van Vien, Ngo Quang Truong, Dong Van Khuyen, Nguyen Duy Hinh, Tran Dinh Tho, Hoang Ngoc Lung, Chu Xuan Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The U.S. Adviser* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 132.

will be demonstrated in later chapters, this did not happen as planned.

Not only were advisers assigned to the CORDS effort and to the combat units in the field, there were also a significant number of advisers were assigned to support the RVNAF training base in an effort to increase the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese military forces. By the end of 1972, the RVNAF would become the largest and most modern military force in Southeast Asia, but even vast amounts of the best equipment in the world were meaningless if the soldiers, sailors, and airmen did not

know how to use it or did not have the leadership and motivation to put it to use in the field against the enemy. Training the Vietnamese had in theory received high priority throughout the war, but in practice too little attention had been given this critical function prior to the initiation of Vietnamization.<sup>24</sup> Even with the new policy in place, improving South Vietnamese training proved to be an uphill battle.

At the beginning of 1968, the ARVN training system consisted of fifty-six training centers of various types and sizes. There were nine national training centers (not including the Airborne and Marine Divisions which also had their own training centers) and thirty-seven provincial training centers. This extensive system of schools and training facilities was under the control of the RVNAF Central Training Command (CTC), which had first been established in 1966. This command was advised and supported by the MACV Training Directorate, which was responsible for providing advice and assistance in the development of an effective military training system for the RVNAF. As such the Training Directorate provided U.S. advisors at the RVNAF schools and training centers, where they assisted RVNAF commandants in the preparation and conduct of training programs.

At first glance, the RVNAF training system of schools and training centers in 1968 was an impressive arrangement, but deeper investigation revealed that it was less than effective in producing the leaders and soldiers necessary to successfully prosecute the war. Prior to 1969, MACV had made numerous proposals to the Vietnamese Joint General Staff and Central Training Command for improving the personnel capacity and effectiveness of the South Vietnamese training facilities, but these recommendations received little attention from the RVNAF high command. As the MACV Command Overview stated, "Despite CTC and MACV efforts, little progress was made in 1969 in these areas due to the complex personnel changes required, JGS reluctance to give the program a high priority, and refusal by RVN field commanders to release experience officers and NCOs [noncommissioned officers] from operational responsibilities."<sup>25</sup>

By early 1970, the U.S. authorities were so disturbed by this situation that the Army Chief of Staff dispatched a fact-finding team led by Brigadier General Donnelly Bolton to Vietnam to tour RVNAF training facilities, provide an objective assessment of the training capabilities of the South Vietnamese, and examine the state of U.S. training assistance. This team found the efforts of both South Vietnamese and the U.S. military training advisers in Vietnam to be less than adequate. The MACV Training Directorate, the U.S. military staff directorate responsible for providing advisers to

RVNAF training facilities, was at only 70 percent of assigned strength, and all the U.S. training advisory detachments in the field were likewise under strength. The quality of advisory personnel assigned to train the South Vietnamese at the RVNAF schools was also an issue, since it appeared to the team that often those deemed unfit to serve in more prestigious operational and staff positions were placed in the RVNAF training billets. Colonel (later Major General) Stan L. McClellan, a member of the Bolton team wrote, "It was clear that top professionals were not being assigned to training advisory duties."<sup>26</sup>

General Abrams agreed with the findings of the Bolton team and urged Bolton to recommend to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that they send more and better training advisers to Vietnam. He was very concerned with filling the ranks of his advisory teams with personnel at their authorized grade level (i.e., lieutenant colonels in positions authorized lieutenant colonels, and so forth), thereby reducing the number of low-ranking advisers with little or no combat experience. Abrams told the team, "It's time that they [the Joint Chiefs of Staff] recognize in Washington that the day of the U.S. fighting force involvement in South Vietnam is at an end. All we have time for now is to complete the preparation of South Vietnam to carry on the task."<sup>27</sup>

At the same time that Abrams was trying to convince the Joint Chiefs of Staff about the critical importance of the training mission in South Vietnam, he was bringing pressure on the RVNAF high command to make improvements to their training system. In a letter to General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, in March 1970, Abrams urged senior South Vietnamese commanders to get behind the training effort. He wrote, "Arrangements for support of CTC activities must be widened and accelerated. As a first order of effort it is essential to enlist the personal interest and assistance of corps, divisional tactical area, and sector commanders each of whom...is a user of the product of the training system, and should contribute to improving the quality of the product."<sup>28</sup>

Due in large part to Abrams' urging and the realization that U.S. forces were in fact going to be withdrawn, the RVNAF high command began to put more emphasis on improving their training system. The fact that the United States contributed \$28 million to expanding and improving the South Vietnamese facilities also helped. Eventually there would be a total of 33 major military and service schools, 13 national and regional training centers, and 14 division training centers. By 1970, the South Vietnamese leaders began to transfer experienced officers and noncommissioned officers to the training centers. Although field commanders only reluctantly gave up their veteran small-unit leaders, by the end

of 1971 nearly half of the South Vietnamese training instructors were men with combat experience. Also by this time the number of U.S. training advisory personnel was increased and by the end of 1971, there were more than 3,500 U.S. advisers directly involved in training at most of the training centers and major RVNAF schools.<sup>29</sup>

Even as the South Vietnamese began to realize the necessity to upgrade their training programs, the quality of U.S. advisers remained an issue. This was true of not just the advisers in the training centers, but also the advisory personnel at all levels, both with field units and with CORDS advisory teams. In December 1969, as the Vietnamization policy began to gather momentum and the above cited changes in force structure, equipment, and training were instituted, Secretary Laird, realizing the criticality of the advisory effort to the Vietnamization process, asked the service secretaries to look at what could be done to upgrade the advisory effort.<sup>30</sup> Prior to this time, service as an adviser was seen by many in the U.S. Army as much less desirable than field command with a U.S. unit and many officers and noncommissioned officers avoided advisory duty. More often than not, the selection process for determining who would become an adviser was largely due to who was available for overseas duty when advisory billets became vacant due to rotation or casualties.<sup>31</sup> For those selected to become advisers, the training program was limited to a six-week course at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Thus, many assigned as advisers had neither the experience, training, nor the inclination to be an adviser. Laird set out to change the situation; he wanted to put the best people in as advisers. He did not get much help initially from the Army; Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor said he would continue to study the problem, but did not offer any useful solutions.<sup>32</sup> The Army was trying to deal with severe personnel problems. The demands of the war resulted in Army officers and noncommissioned officers returning to Vietnam for multiple tours, some separated by less than a year and the demand for advisers only exacerbated the strain on the personnel system. Nevertheless, Abrams continued to urge that more emphasis be placed on assigning qualified combat experienced officers to advisor duty. He demanded “guys who can lead/influence...the business of pacification,” officers who “feel empathy toward the Vietnamese...appreciate their good points and understand their weaknesses;” he wanted advisers who “who can pull ideas and actions out of the Vietnamese” in pursuit of two major goals: “pacification and upgrading the RVNAF.”<sup>33</sup>

Laird, supporting his commander in the field and recognizing that Vietnamization would fail

miserably if the right people were not involved in upgrading the training of the South Vietnamese forces, demanded that the advisory posts be filled. Accordingly, Laird ordered the service secretaries to send “only the most highly qualified” personnel to be advisers. Eventually the message got through to the services and by the end of 1970, there was “an infusion of top-flight military professionals into South Vietnam’s training advisory effort.”<sup>34</sup> The situation would become increasingly better as more American units departed, reducing the number of available assignments, and freeing up for advisory duty large numbers of those officers who would have gone to U.S. units. During 1969, the overall strength of the field advisory teams increased from about 7,000 to 11,900 and then to 14,332 in 1970. Figure 3 shows the approximate U.S. field advisory strength in 1969-1970.

### **U.S. Troop Withdrawals**

As the Vietnamization effort gained momentum, President Nixon and Secretary Laird continued to push for more and faster troop reductions. Nixon had announced the first U.S. troop withdrawal at Midway, but he and Laird were given new motivation to expand their withdrawal plans by former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford. In June 1969, he published an article in *Foreign Affairs* that urged the unilateral withdrawal of 100,000 troops by the end of the year, and of all other personnel by the end of 1970, leaving only logistics and air force personnel.<sup>35</sup> Nixon, never one to shrink from a challenge, stated at a press conference that he could improve upon Clifford’s schedule.<sup>36</sup> This statement received a lot of attention in the press and effectively committed the United States to a unilateral withdrawal from South Vietnam, thus removing the promise of troop reductions as a bargaining chip for Kissinger in his dealings with the North Vietnamese in Paris. This would have serious consequences for peace negotiations and the efficacy of the eventual cease-fire agreement.

The first redeployment of 25,000 U.S. troops promised by President Nixon was accomplished by 27 August 1969 when the last troops from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigades of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division departed the Mekong Delta. In the months following the Midway announcement, there were continuing discussions about the size and pace of the U.S. withdrawal. Laird had come up with several options for the rest of 1969 that ranged from withdrawing a total of 50,000 troops, at the low end, to 100,000 at the high end; in between were a number of different combinations of numbers and forces.

**FIGURE 3 — APPROXIMATE FIELD ADVISORY STRENGTH,  
1969-1970**

TYPE	I CTZ	II CTZ	III CTZ	IV CTZ	TOTAL
<b>Combat Advisers</b>					
Corps	203	272	372	312	1,159
Division	194	136	261	227	818
Regiment	24	24	27	27	102
Armored Cavalry Regiment		44	35	24	103
Infantry Battalion	82	86	144	126	438
Marine Battalion	36				36
Ranger Battalion		12	39	25	76
Other Commands	21	46	85	92	244
<b>Total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>620</b>	<b>963</b>	<b>833</b>	<b>2,976</b>
<b>Support Advisers</b>					
Logistics					390
School/Training					1,524
<b>Total</b>					<b>1,914</b>
<b>CORDS Advisers</b>					
CORDS	736	1,516	1,455	1,976	5,683
Mobile Training Teams	275	622	619	789	2,305
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,011</b>	<b>2,138</b>	<b>2,074</b>	<b>2,765</b>	<b>7,988</b>
<b>Component Advisers</b>					
Air Force Advisory Group					494
Naval Advisory Group					960
<b>Total</b>					<b>1,454</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>					<b>14,332</b>

SOURCE: USMACV "Command History, 1970," Vol. 2, pp. VII-63 to VII-79.

In a memorandum to the President, Laird cautioned him to be careful about withdrawing too many troops too quickly as this would have serious consequences for the pacification program.<sup>37</sup> Laird's warning proved timely. On 6 August, as soldiers from the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division prepared to depart South Vietnam, there was a Communist attack on Cam Ranh Bay. Five days later, the Communists attacked more than one hundred cities, towns, and bases across South Vietnam. An official North Vietnamese history of the war revealed that the Politburo in Hanoi had concluded after the Midway announcement that the United States had "lost its will to fight in Vietnam" and thus the Communists, believing they were in a in a position to dictate the degree and intensity of combat, launched the new round of attacks.<sup>38</sup>

When Nixon had made his announcement in June about the initial U.S. troop withdrawal, he emphasized that one of the criteria for further reductions would be the level of enemy activity. These new Communist attacks clearly went against Nixon's conditions, and accordingly, he announced that he was delaying a decision about additional troop withdrawals. This caused an uproar in Congress and the media. On 12 September, the National Security Council met to discuss the situation. Kissinger reported that "a very natural response from us would have been to stop bringing soldiers home, but by now withdrawal had gained its own momentum."<sup>39</sup> Kissinger had sent the president a memorandum two days before the meeting, expressing concern about the administration's "present course" in South Vietnam. He warned that "Withdrawals of U.S. troops will become like salted peanuts to the American public; the more U.S. troops come home, the more will be demanded. This could eventually result, in effect, in demands for a unilateral withdrawal...The more troops are withdrawn, the more Hanoi will be encouraged."<sup>40</sup> Kissinger would be proven right, but during the NSC meeting, he was the only dissenter to the decision to go ahead with the scheduled troop reductions. On 16 September, Nixon ordered a second increment of 35,000 American troops to be redeployed by December. According to Kissinger, the withdrawals became "inexorable...[and] the President never again permitted the end of a withdrawal period to pass without announcing a new increment for the next."<sup>41</sup>

On 15 December, Nixon ordered a third increment of 50,000 to be redeployed prior to April 1970. On 20 April 1970, he announced that even though 110,000 U.S. troops had been scheduled to be redeployed during the first three increments, a total of 115,000 had actually departed Vietnam. The second phase of the withdrawal, from April 1970 to April 1971, would reduce the total U.S. strength

by a further 150,000. By the end of 1970, only about 344,000 U.S. troops remained in South Vietnam; the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, two brigades of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the entire 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division had been redeployed. As these U.S. forces prepared to depart, they suspended combat operations and the RVNAF took over responsibility for their respective operational areas.

From the initial announcement of U.S. troop withdrawals in June 1969 to the end of November 1972, the United States brought home fourteen increments, reducing total U.S. strength in Vietnam from a peak of 549,000 to a residual force of 27,000 (see Figure 4).<sup>42</sup>

### **“One War”**

Once the initial departure of U.S. forces began, the RVNAF was forced to assume more responsibility for the war, regardless of the progress of Vietnamization and pacification. This was the situation that confronted General Abrams. While still fighting a war, he had to increase the efforts to prepare the RVNAF to fill the void on the battlefield left by the redeploying U.S. forces. He was essentially fighting for time. Accordingly, he hoped to retain “a balanced combat capability and as much capability for as long as possible.”<sup>43</sup>

When Abrams assumed command of MACV in 1968, he knew that something had to be done to improve the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces. Even before President Nixon had announced Vietnamization as the new U.S. policy in South Vietnam, General Abrams had taken measures to increase the effectiveness of the RVNAF training base. However, this had not historically been the focus of MACV’s efforts. Abrams had inherited the long-standing U.S. mission of closing with and defeating the Communists to force them to withdraw from South Vietnam. With Nixon’s announcement of the Vietnamization policy and the receipt of the new mission statement, Abrams was told “to assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed forces to take over an increasing share of combat operations” and focus on (1) providing “maximum assistance” to the South Vietnamese to strengthen their forces, (2) supporting the pacification effort, and (3) reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy.<sup>44</sup>

General Abrams, although continuing to have serious misgivings about the accelerated U.S. troop withdrawals, understood his marching orders and stepped up measures to improve the combat

**FIGURE 4 — U.S. TROOP REDEPLOYMENTS FROM VIETNAM**

INCREMENT	DATES	FORCES REDEPLOYED	FORCES REMAINING
I	Jul - Aug 1969	25,000	519,000
II	Sep - Dec 1969	35,000	484,000
III	Jan - Apr 1970	50,000	434,000
IV	Jul - Oct 1970	50,000	384,000
V	Nov - Dec 1970	40,000	344,000
VI	Jan - Apr 1971	60,000	284,000
VII	May - Jun 1971	29,300	254,000
VIII	Jul - Aug 1971	28,700	226,000
IX	Sep - Nov 1971	42,000	184,000
X	Dec - Jan 1972	45,000	139,000
XI	Feb - Apr 1972	70,000	69,000
XII	May - Jun 1972	20,000	49,000
XIII	Jul - Sep 1972	10,000	39,000
XIV	Oct - Nov 1972	12,000	27,000

Source: Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Indochina Monographs: Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 27; Larry A. Nicksch, *Vietnamization: The Program and Its Problems* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, January 1972), p. A-1.

capabilities of the South Vietnamese units. This was not a new problem for Abrams and since his assumption of command, he had been concerned that the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces were essentially fighting two different wars. Abrams had sought to end the division of roles and missions between American and South Vietnamese combat forces by the adoption of a single combined allied strategy, thus eliminating “the tacit existence of two separate strategies, attrition and pacification.”<sup>45</sup> Abrams described this “one war” concept as “a strategy focused upon protecting the population so that

the civil government can establish its authority as opposed to an earlier conception of the purpose of the war — destruction of the enemy's forces."<sup>46</sup> The "one war" concept was formalized in the MACV Objectives Plan approved in March 1969 and was eventually adopted joint by the U.S. and Saigon as the Combined Strategic Objectives Plan, which specified that the "RVNAF must participate fully within its capabilities in all types of operations...to prepare for the time when it must assume the entire responsibility."<sup>47</sup>

As soon as the new plan was signed, Abrams set out to make sure that MACV forces fully accepted his "one war" concept, forever eliminating the division of labor that too often had fragmented allied efforts. Thus, Abrams was already shifting the focus of MACV when he received the official change of mission from President Nixon. Armed with the new "one war" combined strategy and urged by his Commander in Chief to Vietnamize the war, Abrams hoped to bring the combat situation under control while at the same time shifting the preponderance of the responsibility for the war to the South Vietnamese as American troop withdrawals increased in size and frequency. One way that he wanted to do this was to have them fight side by side with the American troops in the field in combined operations.

American and South Vietnamese units had conducted combined operations prior to the adoption of the "one war" policy in 1969; but during earlier operations, the South Vietnamese troops usually filled a secondary, supporting role on the periphery of the main action. Many American combat commanders were reluctant to operate with South Vietnamese units and typically regarded the ARVN as no more than "an additional burden" that had to be taken in tow, more "apt to cause problems...than be helpful."<sup>48</sup> Although this situation changed somewhat for the better after the 1968 Tet offensive, Abrams, faced with the urgent task of Vietnamizing the war, ordered closer cooperation between the American and South Vietnamese forces. The hope was that American units would serve as models for Saigon's soldiers by integrating the operations of the two national forces more closely together. This had worked very well in South Korea and had eventually improved the fighting abilities of the Republic of Korea armed forces. Abrams and his advisers manifestly hoped that the Korean model would also work with the South Vietnamese.

Although the effort to integrate the South Vietnamese troops into the main battle effort would prove to be uneven and varied from corps tactical zone to corps tactical zone, several new programs

were instituted in accordance with Abrams directives.

In I Corps, Lieutenant General Richard G. Stillwell, the U.S. XXIV Corps Commander, worked very closely with the ARVN division commander, Major General (later Lieutenant General) Ngo Quang Truong, integrating the South Vietnamese units into operational plans as a full partner. Under what was essentially a U.S.-ARVN combined command, the South Vietnamese forces operated closely with the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Airmobile), and the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Mechanized) in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces.<sup>49</sup> After Stillwell was replaced by Major General Melvin Zais later in 1969, the new commander continued Stillwell's emphasis on combined operations and other U.S. forces in I Corps stepped up their cooperative efforts with the ARVN. Abrams was extremely pleased with the performance of the ARVN forces in I Corps; and later in 1969, he ordered the U.S. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division south, reoriented remaining American combat forces in the region toward area security, and eventually sent home one of the two American marine divisions there.

In II Corps Tactical Zone, U.S. commanders also pursued combined operations, but with less success. General William R. Peers, commander of I Field Force and his counterpart, Lieutenant General Lu Lan, commander of ARVN II Corps, jointly established the "Pair Off" program, which called for each ARVN unit to be closely and continually affiliated with a U.S. counterpart unit. Operations were to be conducted jointly, regardless of the size unit each force could commit, and coordination and cooperation were effected from Corps to battalion and districts. Under this program, the U.S. 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the U.S. 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade joined forces with the ARVN 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Divisions. During the period following the initiation of the "Pair Off" program, three significant combined operations were conducted in II Corps, and each achieved a modest level of success. However, this approach did not work as well as the combined operations in I Corps for a number of reasons. First, the two corps level headquarters, unlike those in I Corps, were not co-located, and this made coordination more difficult. Additionally, the ARVN field commanders in II Corps were not as enthusiastic about working with U.S. forces as were Major General Truong and his fellow ARVN commanders in I Corps. Consequently, the motivation to learn from the Americans was not present and this affected coordination and cooperation between the two national forces.

In III Corps Tactical Zone, U.S. II Field Force Commander, Lieutenant General Julian Ewell

and his counterpart, Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri, commander of ARVN III Corps, instituted a program called “Dong Tien” (Progress Together). The three major goals of this program were: (1) to increase the quantity and quality of combined and coordinated joint operations; (2) to materially advance the three major ARVN missions of pacification support, improvement of combat effectiveness, and intensification of combat operations; and (3) to effect a significant increase in the efficiency of utilizing critical combat and combat support elements, particularly army aviation assets.<sup>50</sup> This program called for the close association of ARVN III Corps and U.S. II Field Force units on a continuing basis. Under this concept, as an ARVN battalion reached a satisfactory level of combat effectiveness, it was to be phased out of the program and returned to independent operations. The “Dong Tien” program had a positive effect on ARVN units throughout III Corps. The 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. and 5<sup>th</sup> ARVN Infantry Divisions worked very closely together, and the repetitive combined operations prepared the ARVN division to assume the American unit’s area of operation when it was redeployed in 1970. When the 5<sup>th</sup> ARVN Division moved its command post to Binh Long Province and assumed control of the old “Big Red One” area, a major milestone in the Vietnamization process had been passed.

Although these combined operations were not all successful, they were instrumental in most cases in increasing the battlefield proficiency of the RVNAF units. Thus, they helped pave the way for the South Vietnamese commanders and troops to assume new responsibilities as more U.S. forces began to withdraw. Unfortunately, however, these programs could not eliminate many of the long standing problems that haunted the RVNAF and would ultimately contribute to the downfall of the South Vietnamese regime. The expanding RVNAF suffered from a lack of technical competence, weak staff officers, inexperience at planning and executing large-scale combined arms operations, and a number of other serious maladies. Leadership, particularly at the senior levels, lay at the root of all RVNAF weakness. This problem greatly concerned General Abrams and his senior commanders as they tried to prepare the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for the war. Programs such as “Pair Off” and “Dong Tien” were designed to help bolster RVNAF leadership and combat skills, but they could not fully repair long-term ills in the South Vietnamese system.

By the end of 1969, Vietnamization had made progress in several areas. The modernization effort had resulted in the equipping of all ARVN units with modern equipment. The advisory effort had received new emphasis and the RVNAF training system was improving. The redeployment of U.S.

troops had forced the RVNAF to assume more responsibility for the war, as the number of battalion-size operations conducted by the South Vietnamese almost doubled between 1968 and 1969. Still, combat performance of the South Vietnamese was uneven at best. Some units, like the 51<sup>st</sup> ARVN Infantry Battalion, did very well against their Communist opponents, while others, like the 22<sup>nd</sup> ARVN Infantry Division, were largely ineffective in the field (the 22<sup>nd</sup> had conducted 1,800 ambushes during the summer months of 1969 and netted only six enemy killed).<sup>51</sup>

The MACV Office of Information publicized the increased participation of RVNAF, emphasizing that in time the South Vietnamese forces would be able to stand on their own.<sup>52</sup> Despite these claims, many advisers felt that the South Vietnamese were still too dependent on U.S. forces for support and worried about their ability to carry on the war by themselves after the U.S. withdrew. The MACV public relations statements were correct in one sense -- it was clear that time would be necessary before the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the North Vietnamese. The key question to many was whether there was enough time left before all U.S. units were withdrawn.

Vietnamization received its first test in the spring of 1970 when Nixon ordered an attack into the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. This was a combined attack which involved 32,000 American soldiers and 48,000 South Vietnamese troops. The main attack into the "Fishhook" region was made by elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment. South Vietnamese forces conducted a supporting attack into the "Parrot's Beak" region. Both attacks went very well and the allied forces located and destroyed numerous large Communist base camps, capturing an impressive array of supplies and material, to include 16 million rounds of various caliber ammunition; 143,000 rockets; 22,892 individual weapons; 5,487 land mines; 62,000 grenades; 14 million pounds of rice; and 435 vehicles.<sup>53</sup>

The South Vietnamese forces, under the command of Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri, supported by U.S. artillery, tactical air, and helicopter gunships, performed relatively well, accomplishing all assigned missions. Nixon announced that the South Vietnamese performance in Cambodia was "visible proof of the success of Vietnamization."<sup>54</sup>

The truth of the situation was somewhat less than Nixon wanted to believe. The South Vietnamese units that had participated in the incursion were mostly from elite units, rather than the mainstream of South Vietnamese troops. South Vietnamese artillery still evidenced an inability to

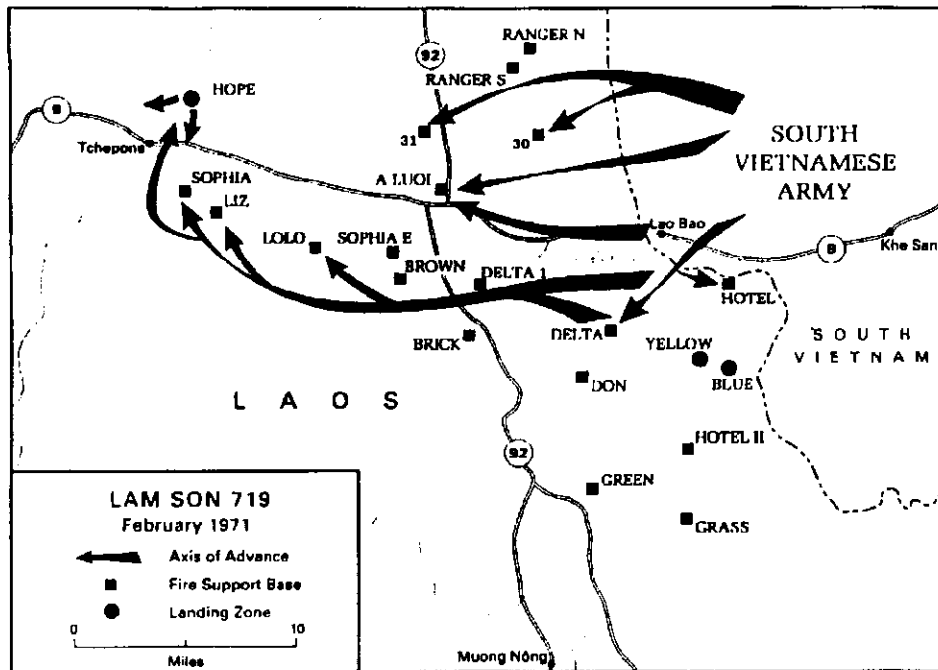
provide support for the ARVN troops, so the ARVN commanders continued to rely heavily on U.S. fire support. In addition, the Communist soldiers fled when the allied forces launched the invasion and there had been no intense fighting. Therefore, the rosey picture that Nixon wanted to paint was a false impression.

The glaring shortcomings that still existed in the RVNAF were amply demonstrated the following year when operation LAM SON 719 was launched as part of a continuing effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail and deny the North Vietnamese sanctuaries; the specific objective of the attack was a series of base areas along highway 19 in Laos (See Map 3). This time, American troops were prohibited from crossing the border, so the South Vietnamese forces would attack by themselves without U.S. units or American advisers. The attack kicked off at 0700 hours on 8 February and went reasonably well at first. The South Vietnamese secured their initial objectives, but then became bogged down along the highway. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese had rushed reinforcements to the area and a major battle ensued that lasted for another month. While some South Vietnamese soldiers fought valiantly, many more fought poorly or fled in panic. The operation ended with ARVN units fleeing back across the border in disarray. U.S. sources listed South Vietnamese losses as 3,800 killed in action, 5,200 wounded, and 775 missing. Nixon tried to put the best face on the situation, but the truth was that the South Vietnamese had performed very poorly on their own. With minimal U.S. support and without their American advisers, the South Vietnamese were not able to handle the North Vietnamese regulars in pitched battle.

LAM SON 719 demonstrated that Vietnamization had not been the success that Nixon had previously proclaimed. U.S. and South Vietnamese military officials worked hard to bolster the morale and confidence of the ARVN after the debacle in Laos. Training programs were intensified and new equipment was issued to replace that which had been lost during the LAM SON operation. At the same time, the U.S. troop withdrawals continued unabated. By January 1972, only 158,000 Americans remained in South Vietnam, the lowest number since 1965.

The North Vietnamese watched the U.S. withdrawals closely and decided that it was time to put Vietnamization to the final test. They believed that the U.S. did not have enough combat power left in South Vietnam to prevent a South Vietnamese defeat. Accordingly, the Politburo in Hanoi directed a new offensive in the South.<sup>55</sup> The North Vietnamese attack began on 30 March 1972 when three

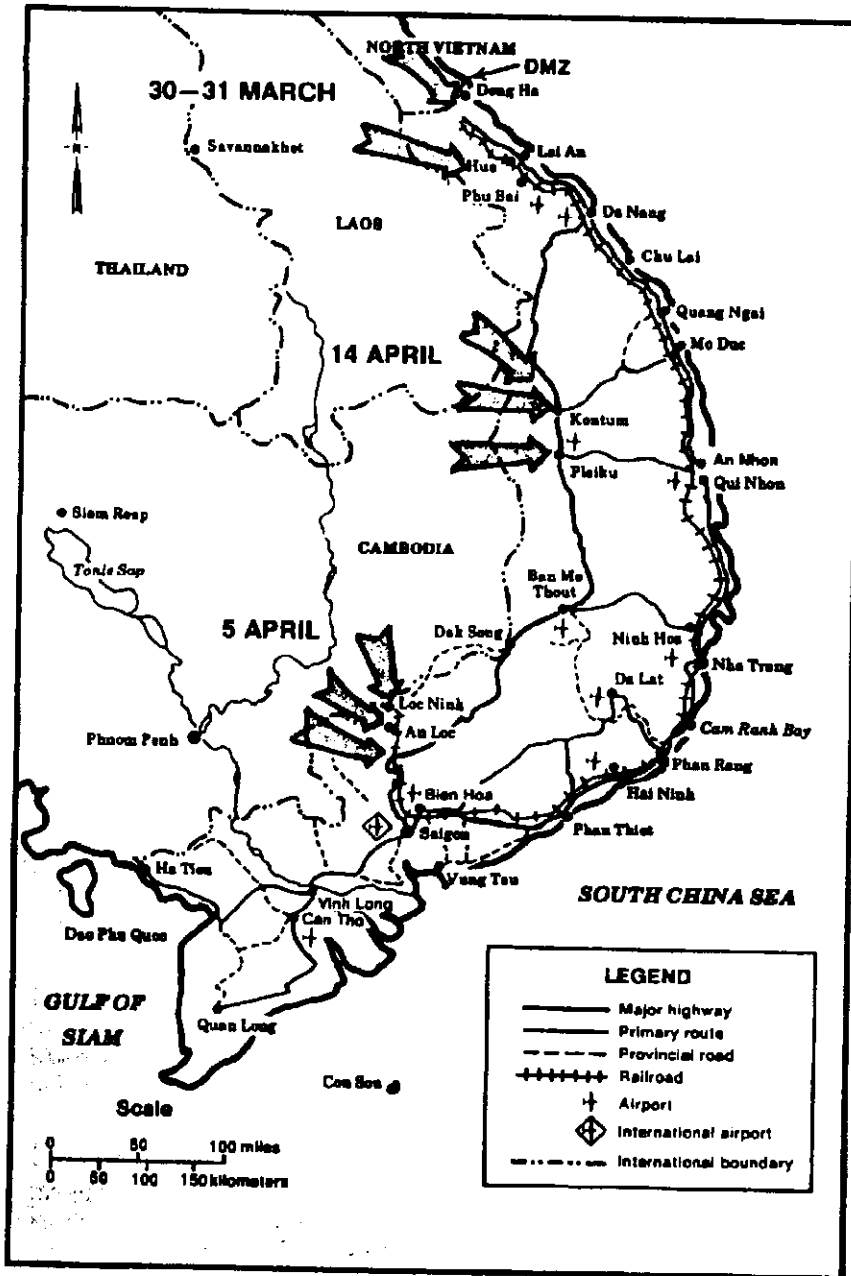
MAP 3 — LAM SON 719, FEBRUARY 1971



Source: William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996), p. 426.

divisions attacked south across the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam toward Quang Tri and Hue (See Map 4). Three days later, three more divisions moved from sanctuaries in Cambodia and pushed into Binh Long Province, the capital city of which was only sixty-five miles from Saigon. Additional North Vietnamese forces attacked across the Cambodian border in the Central Highlands toward Kontum. A total of 14 NVA infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments (including 120,000 troops and approximately 1,200 tanks and other armored vehicles) participated in the offensive.

MAP 4 — NVA NGUYEN HUE OFFENSIVE, 1972



Source: U.S. Department of the Army, *RB 100-2, Selected Readings in Tactics, Vol. I* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, April 1974), p. 7-32.

The Communist invasion was characterized by large-scale conventional infantry tactics, supported by tanks and massive amounts of artillery fire. This was a scale of warfare that the South Vietnamese had seldom experienced. At first, they were almost totally overwhelmed. South Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri fled in the face of the North onslaught, abandoning the city and fleeing south. At An Loc and Kontum, the ARVN soldiers fared better, but suffered horrendous casualties during the North Vietnamese attacks. The battles raged all over South Vietnam into the summer months. U.S. advisors and American airpower enabled the South Vietnamese to hold on and eventually prevail, even retaking Quang Tri in September.

Despite the fact that the South Vietnamese had barely held against the North Vietnamese, and then only with massive amounts of U.S. support, Nixon declared Vietnamization a success. There was all kinds of evidence to the contrary. General Abrams stated that "American airpower and not South Vietnamese arms" had caused the North Vietnamese defeat.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Nixon and his advisers trumpeted the idea that the South Vietnamese victory demonstrated that Vietnamization had been a success. Thus, Vietnamization and the South Vietnamese "victory" in 1972 became one of the underlying rationales for complete U.S. withdrawal and Nixon's "peace with honor."

While the fighting had continued in South Vietnam, Henry Kissinger had been working diligently in Paris to hammer out a peace agreement with Le Duc Tho. By the fall of 1972, they were close to an agreement, but by December, they were at an impasse again. When the North Vietnamese walked out on the talks, Nixon launched what became known as the "Christmas bombing." Beginning on 18 December and for the next eleven days, U.S. B-52s, F-105s, F-4s, F-111s, and A-6s struck targets all over North Vietnam, dropping over 40,000 tons of bombs. Shortly thereafter, the North Vietnamese negotiators returned to the table in Paris. Kissinger and Tho finally reached an agreement and at eight o'clock Sunday morning Saigon time on January 28, the cease-fire went into effect.

Under the terms of the cease-fire agreement, the U.S. agreed to "...stop all its military activities against the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam" and remove remaining American troops, including advisors, from South Vietnam within sixty days.<sup>57</sup> U.S. forces departed South Vietnam as agreed with the last troops leaving Saigon on 29 March 1973. That day, the last sixty-one American POWs known to be held by the North Vietnamese were released. Vietnamization was over once and for all. America was out of Vietnam.

Unfortunately for the South Vietnamese, the Paris Accords had left an estimated 150,000 North Vietnamese troops inside the borders of South Vietnam. The cease-fire was short-lived and combat returned as both sides tried to grab as much territory as possible. For the rest of 1973 and most of 1974, the North and South Vietnamese fought each other all over South Vietnam.

Nixon had coerced Thieu into acquiescing to the Paris Accords, promising that he would come to the aid of the South Vietnamese if North Vietnam tried another major offensive. With this in mind and using weapons and equipment stockpiled during 1972, the South Vietnamese initially held their own against the North Vietnamese. However, as these stocks began to wane, Thieu had no one to turn to for support. Nixon, reeling from the impact of the Watergate investigation, was fighting for his political life and was unable to generate any interest in the plight of the South Vietnamese. On 9 August 1974, Nixon resigned from the Presidency. Thieu and his countrymen had always relied on Nixon's promises to intervene if the North Vietnamese violated the cease-fire. Now Nixon was gone. Nixon's successor, Gerald Ford, promised that "the existing commitments this nation has made in the past are still valid and will be fully honored in my administration."<sup>58</sup>

This was a commitment that Ford could not keep, given the prevailing sentiment in Congress. When the North Vietnamese decided to test the South Vietnamese with a limited attack against Phuoc Long Province, the ARVN fought poorly and the North Vietnamese routed the defenders, killing or capturing 3,000 soldiers, took control of vast quantities of war materiel, and "liberated" the entire province. The United States did nothing.

Both Saigon and Hanoi were shocked. Thieu finally realized that his forces had been relegated to fighting a "poor man's war."<sup>59</sup> The North Vietnamese realized that the time was ripe for a knock-out blow. Accordingly, they planned a two-year strategy that called for large scale offensives in 1975 to create conditions for a "general offensive, general uprising" in 1976.<sup>60</sup> They believed that the United States would not or could not intervene.

The North Vietnamese launched their offensive on 10 March 1975 with an attack on Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. They overran the city in two days and then turned their attention on Pleiku and Kontum. The South Vietnamese, realizing that they were on their own without any hope of U.S. support, fell back in panic. When Thieu decided to shorten his lines by withdrawing his forces out of the Highlands, supposedly to concentrate his forces for a major effort to retake Ban Me Thuot, the

retreat rapidly turned into a rout (See Map 5). While the Communist forces in the Highlands attacked toward the sea, additional Communist troops in the northern provinces drove southward from Quang Tri. One by one, the coastal cities and bases fell. The Communists drove rapidly down the coast and on 30 April 1975, their tanks crashed through the gates of the Presidential Palace in Saigon and the war was over. The South Vietnamese forces had collapsed in less than fifty-five days.

In conclusion, while Vietnamization provided a suitable (at least from the American perspective) cover for the withdrawal of the United States from South Vietnam, it failed in its stated objective, which was to prepare the South Vietnamese to defend themselves after the departure of U.S. troops. Whether Nixon and Laird were only looking for a “decent interval” as some have suggested or really thought that Vietnamization would actually succeed in preparing the South Vietnamese to defend themselves is subject to debate. What is clear, however, is that the performance of the South Vietnamese forces in 1975 demonstrated that the policy had not in the final analysis achieved its stated goal. Once the North Vietnamese began their attack in December 1974, the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces performed abysmally. The war was clearly lost on the battlefield by the South Vietnamese, but that does not absolve the United States of its share of the responsibility for the debacle. Despite gains made in preparing the South Vietnamese to assume responsibility for the war, the fact that the Peace Accords left more than 150,000 North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam and the failure of the United States to live up to the commitment made by Nixon doomed the armed forces of South Vietnam. The army that had become so dependent on U.S. firepower and support lost its will and was unable to fight on its own when that support was denied them. Despite all the time and treasure expended in getting them ready to defend themselves, they proved woefully inadequate for the task. Thus, in the end, Vietnamization, when coupled with the flawed Peace Accords and the failure of the United States to honor promises made by two presidents, achieved neither peace for the South Vietnamese, nor honor for the United States.



## ENDNOTES

1. Robert B. Semple, "Nixon Vows to End War With a 'New Leadership,'" *The New York Times*, 6 Mar 1968.
2. Semple, "Nixon Withholds His Peace Ideas," *The New York Times*, 11 Mar 1968.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.
4. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), p. 198.
5. Interview (transcribed) of General Andrew J. Goodpaster, by Colonel William D. Johnson and Lieutenant Colonel James C. Ferguson, 1976, Andrew J. Goodpaster Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania.
6. Interview of Jerry Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, 1969-1973, by William H. Hammond, 3 Oct 86, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
7. Memo, Laird to the President, 13 Mar 69, subj: Trip to Vietnam, Nixon Presidential Materials, National Archives and Records Administration.
8. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 272. By all accounts, "Vietnamization" became the accepted term for Nixon's new policy at this meeting. However, Abrams biographer Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt, From the Battle of the Bulge to Vietnam and Beyond: Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), pp. 254-256, maintains that Abrams started the process of helping the South Vietnamese armed forces become more capable when he assumed command from General Westmoreland in 1968 and that Nixon and Laird merely adopted the "Vietnamization" label and formalized it as administration policy (accompanied by U.S. troop withdrawals). Nixon virtually agreed with this assessment in *No More Vietnams* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), p. 105.
9. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, *Hearings on Military Posture, Part I*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970, pp. 7023-7024.
10. Alexander M. Haig, Jr. with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), p. 226.
11. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), p. 392.
12. *Ibid.*
13. National Security Study Memorandum 36, Kissinger to SecState, SecDef, and DCI, 10 Apr 69, subject: Vietnamizing the War, U.S. Army Center of Military History; Nixon, *Memoirs*, p. 392; Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 272.

14. Richard M. Nixon, *Public Papers of the President, 1969* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 443. The assessment of RVNAF progress and level of enemy activity would be left to Abrams' on-site evaluation.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Indochina Monographs: Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 18.
17. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 274.
18. Talking Paper, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, 3 Oct 69, subject: U.S. Objectives in Southeast Asia, Thomas C. Thayer Papers, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
19. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Department of Defense, *Hearings on Department of Defense Appropriations for 1971, Part I*, 91<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1970, p. 311.
20. Even before Nixon assumed office, plans had been developed to increase the size of the RVNAF. Under what became known as the May-68 Plan, MACV had instituted a program to increase and modernize the South Vietnamese armed forces. This program focused on developing the RVNAF into a balanced force with command, administration, and self-support capabilities to continue the fighting successfully after the withdrawal of U.S. and NVA troops. However, It is important to note that at no time during the discussion and implementation of the May-68 Plan did anyone, including MACV, ever consider the "prospect of a unilateral American withdrawal that would leave South Vietnam facing a combined Viet Cong and North Vietnamese threat." This was to change under Nixon and Laird.
21. Cao Van Vien, Ngo Quang Truong, Dong Van Khuyen, Nguyen Duy Hinh, Tran Dinh Tho, Hoang Ngoc Lung, and Chu Xuan Vien, *Indochina Monographs: The U.S. Adviser* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 10.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8, 10.
23. Fact Sheet, MACMA-PP, 13 Aug 1969, subject: Combat Assistance Team (CAT), *Records of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Part I (Microfilm Edition)*, Reel 40/Frame 0983.
24. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 371.
25. David Fulghum and Terrence Maitland, *The Vietnam Experience: South Vietnam on Trial, Mid-1970 to 1972* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1984), p. 55.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
27. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 317; Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, pp. 56-57.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

29. Vien, Truong, Khuyen, Hinh, Tho, Lung, and Vien, *The U.S. Adviser*, p. 175.
30. Memo, Laird to Service Secretaries, 16 Dec 69, subject: Quantity and Quality of U.S. Advisors in Vietnam, Abrams Papers, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
31. This was the author's personal experience; advisory duty was not seen as "career enhancing." The author, as a newly promoted captain with two years in the Army and not even having commanded a company, was assigned in late 1971 as an adviser to a South Vietnamese infantry regimental commander.
32. Memo, Resor to Secretary of Defense, 2 Feb 70, subject: Quantity and Quality of U.S. Advisors in Vietnam, Abrams Papers, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
33. Memorandum for Record, Brigadier General Albert H. Smith, Jr., MACV J-1, 15 Dec 69, subject: General Abrams' Guidance on Selecting Advisors, Abrams Papers, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
34. Fulghum and Maitland, *South Vietnam on Trial*, p. 56.
35. Clark Clifford, "A Viet Nam Reappraisal," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 47, no. 4 (July 1969), p. 610.
36. Nixon, *Public Papers, 1969*, p. 472.
37. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 275.
38. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Report to General Vo Nguyen Giap, A Consolidated Report on the Fight Against the United States for the Salvation of Vietnam by Our People*, Hanoi, 1987, p. 26. The North Vietnamese found that they could not sustain the August attacks because they had not fully recovered from the losses incurred during the 1968 Tet Offensive.
39. Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. 283.
40. Memorandum, Kissinger to Nixon, Subject: Our Course in Vietnam, 10 Sep 1969, reprinted in *White House Years*, pp. 1480-1482.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Hinh, *Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire*, pp. 26-27.
43. Talking Paper, AVHGC-P, USARV, 17 Jul 69, sub: NSSM 36 -- Vietnamization, Southeast Asia Branch Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
44. Message, Wheeler JCS to McCain and Abrams, 6 Aug 1969, Abrams Papers, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
45. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 362.

46. Samuel Lipsman and Edward Doyle, *The Vietnam Experience: Fighting for Time* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983), p. 53.
47. JGS-MACV Combined Campaign Plan 1969, 30 Sep 1968, Southeast Asia Branch Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
48. Ngo Quang Truong, *Indochina Monographs: RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 162.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
50. II FFORCEV Circular Number 525-1, 26 June 1969, subject: The Dong Tien (Progress Together) Program, Long Binh, South Vietnam.
51. Lipsman and Doyle, *Fighting for Time*, p. 70.
52. Message, Wheeler to Abrams, 4 Jul 1969, subject: Publicizing ARVN Performance; Message, Abrams to Wheeler, 8 Aug 1969, subject: Publicizing ARVN Achievements, both in Abrams Papers, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
53. William H. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1996), pp. 401-492.
54. Nixon, *Public Papers, 1970*, p. 536. In a memo from Nixon to Haldeman, on 11 May 1970, the president said that he wanted him to devise "...a positive, coordinated administration program for getting across the fact that this mission has been enormously successful."
55. Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN), Directive 42, December 1971, p. 1, Pike Collection, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.
56. Clarke, *Advice and Support*, p. 482.
57. The entire agreement, including the Protocols on the Cease-Fire and the Joint Military Commission, Prisoners and Detainees, the International Commission of Control and Supervision, and Mine Clearing in North Vietnam is found in Walter S. Dillard, *Sixty Days to Peace: Implementing the Paris Peace Accords, Vietnam 1973* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1982), pp. 187-225.
58. Letter, Ford to Thieu, 10 August 1974, White House Central Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
59. Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory: An Account of the Liberation of South Vietnam* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 17.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.