

American involvement in Vietnam split sharply into two parts. Up to 1968, the United States was trying to win the war and believed that it could do so. After 1968, the driving objective was to get out.

The withdrawal stretched out for another five years. Active US involvement finally ended with the Linebacker II “Christmas bombing” of North Vietnam in December 1972, which led to the Paris Peace Accords and a cease-fire in January 1973. More than a third of the 58,000 US war dead in Vietnam were killed after 1968.

The turning point was Tet. On the night of Jan. 30-31, 1968, at the beginning of the Lunar New Year holiday, the North

Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong struck at more than 100 locations all over South Vietnam, including the US Embassy in Saigon. The offensive was soundly defeated but the political damage was overwhelming.

Tet revealed the untruth of assurances by the White House and Military Assistance Command Vietnam that the war was almost won. Two months previously, MACV commander Gen. William C. Westmoreland said in a speech at the National Press Club that the enemy was “certainly losing” and that their hopes were “bankrupt.”

Now Westmoreland wanted 206,756 more troops (in addition to almost 500,000 he had already) and another 17 fighter squadrons. On March 31, President

Lyndon B. Johnson announced a unilateral bombing halt in Vietnam and said he would not run for re-election. He said the US was “prepared to move immediately toward peace through negotiations.”

Richard M. Nixon inherited the commitment when he took office in January 1969. “We were clearly on the way out of Vietnam by negotiation if possible, by unilateral withdrawal if necessary,” said Nixon’s national security advisor, Henry Kissinger.

Nixon refused to simply cut and run. That would dishonor the sacrifice of US casualties in Vietnam and undermine the credibility of the United States as a superpower. “The first defeat in our nation’s history would result in a collapse of confidence in American leadership, not

A B-52 Stratofortress bomber aircraft is shown on a runway, viewed from a low angle. The aircraft is dark in color with a white stripe along the fuselage. In the foreground, several large bombs are visible, some with their tails and fins. The scene is set against a bright, hazy sky.

The Long RETREAT

By John T. Correll

The United States gave up on Vietnam in 1968. Getting out was harder than getting in.

only in Asia but throughout the world,” Nixon said.

Instead, the United States would prepare the South Vietnamese to take over in a process called “Vietnamization.” US force levels peaked at 543,000 in April 1969 and troop withdrawals began in July. US participation shifted steadily toward airpower.

After the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, Nixon said the US had achieved “peace with honor.” In actuality, it was a barely concealed defeat for the United States, and even worse for the South Vietnamese. Without US help, they could not withstand a main force invasion by North Vietnam. Saigon fell in 1975.

All sorts of explanations are offered for what happened. Military historian

Lewis Sorely—a leading exponent of the theory that the war could have been won with a better strategy and approach—assigns the principal blame for the defeat to Westmoreland. In *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam*, Sorely accuses Westmoreland of failing in strategy and leadership and neglecting the development of South Vietnamese military capabilities.

That puts too much of the responsibility on Westmoreland. Any prospect of victory had been foreclosed by earlier decisions. The broader question is whether the Vietnam War was ever America’s to win or lose.

THE STRATEGY THAT FAILED

The US experience in Vietnam was a classic case of unplanned mission

creep. It started as training and advice but slipped into counterinsurgency and then into conventional war.

Operation Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against North Vietnam, began in a half-hearted way in March 1965. Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor warned that the North Vietnamese would not be impressed by one mission a week against minor targets. “I fear that to date, Rolling Thunder in their eyes has been merely a few isolated thunderclaps,” he said in a message to Washington.

A month later, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara decided that Rolling Thunder was not working and shifted the strategy and emphasis to a ground war in the south. McNamara’s view was “that the place to destroy the enemy was



USAF photo

B-52s await bomb loading before a mission over Vietnam. Response to Hanoi’s Easter offensive made it clear that North Vietnam could not successfully invade the south so long as it was defended by US airpower.



LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto



AP Photo by Michael Lipchitz

Clockwise from above: A month after Rolling Thunder began, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (at right, with President Johnson at the White House) decided it was not working and switched to a ground war strategy in the south; Le Duc Tho (l) and Henry Kissinger, the chief negotiators, in Paris during the peace talks of 1973; Johnson (l) visits MACV commander Gen. William Westmoreland at Cam Ranh Bay in South Vietnam in 1967. They considered the war almost won. Tet demonstrated that it was not so.



LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto

in South Vietnam,” said Gen. William W. Momyer, commander of 7th Air Force. “According to his strategy, the mission of in-country support took priority over all other missions in Laos or North Vietnam.”

“This fateful decision contributed to our ultimate loss of South Vietnam as much as any other action we took during our involvement,” said Adm. U. S. Grant Sharp Jr., commander of US Pacific Command.

Two Marine Corps battalions had been sent to Da Nang in March to protect the air base there. In July, the White House agreed to Westmoreland’s request for 44 ground force battalions, about 194,000 troops. Westmoreland, focused fully on South Vietnam, adopted a strategy of attrition and “search-and-destroy” missions into the countryside. The United States had stumbled into a land war in Asia.

There were several things wrong with this, the main one being that the war was instigated, commanded, and sustained by the infiltration of troops, equipment, and supplies from North Vietnam. The United States and South Vietnam could not win it with operations in the south. Nevertheless,

fearful of drawing the Soviet Union and China actively into the war, the Johnson Administration ruled out a combined arms offensive against North Vietnam.

Rolling Thunder continued for another three years but with crippling constraints and prohibitions. US troop levels rose toward half a million and the United States effectively took over the ground war from the South Vietnamese.

After Tet, the predictions of imminent victory lost all credibility, especially when the *New York Times* discovered and reported Westmoreland's request for 206,000 additional troops. Johnson halted the bombing north of the 20th parallel, then moved the line to the 19th parallel, and in November stopped the bombing of North Vietnam altogether.

BOGGED DOWN IN PARIS

Negotiations with North Vietnam began in Paris in May 1968 with longtime Democratic Party stalwart Averell Harriman leading the US delegation. In the first of many concessions, the United States agreed to admit the Viet Cong—which had been created by the North Vietnamese—to the peace talks if Hanoi would permit the government of South Vietnam to be there as well. The Viet Cong took their seat in Paris as the “Provisional Revolutionary Government,” which was likewise invented in Hanoi.

According to Harriman, there was an “understanding” that if the bombing stopped, Hanoi would not “take advantage” of it by increasing its attacks and infiltration of the south. Such an understanding existed only in Harriman's wishful thinking, based on North Vietnamese “assent by silence” to American statements.

Harriman stuck to his story. In May 1969, he lectured the Nixon Administration that “50,000 American troops should be pulled out at once. It would be a signal to Saigon that they've got to get together politically. It would be a sign to Hanoi the President means what he says about seeking peace. It won't be taken as a sign of weakness. ... If we take some steps to reduce the violence, if we take the lead, I'm satisfied that they will follow.”

Nixon appointed Henry Cabot Lodge, a former ambassador to South Vietnam, to replace Harriman in Paris, but the real negotiations were carried on behind closed doors by Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, a member of the North Vietnamese politburo. Nixon and Kissinger hoped that the private sessions might break the public deadlock, but that did not happen. “Hanoi was not prepared then or for the four years afterward to settle for anything

other than total victory, including the unconditional withdrawal of all US forces and the overthrow of the Saigon political structure,” Kissinger said.

Although the United States did not fully understand it yet, North Vietnamese policy had been directed for some time by Le Duan, first secretary of the Communist Party, who had marginalized both the aging legendary leader Ho Chi Minh and army chief Vo Nguyen Giap. Tet, which had been a military failure even though it rebounded to Hanoi's political success, had been Le Duan's doing. Le Duc Tho was Le Duan's right-hand man.

“We have ruled out attempting to impose a purely military solution on the battlefield,” Nixon said. “We have also ruled out either a one-sided withdrawal from Vietnam, or the acceptance in Paris of terms that would amount to a disguised American retreat.”

VIETNAMIZATION

The centerpiece of Nixon's plan was “Vietnamization,” a term coined by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, who also became its foremost advocate. The South Vietnamese would be trained and equipped to take over the war, followed by a complete withdrawal of US combat forces.

In August 1969, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., who replaced Westmoreland at MACV, got new orders and a new mission statement. The emphasis for the United States, Kissinger said, changed to “providing ‘maximum assistance’ to the South Vietnamese to strengthen their forces, supporting pacification efforts, and reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy.”

Abrams dumped Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy in favor of “clear and hold”—clearing an area of the enemy and keeping it clear. Abrams “abandoned the large-scale offensive operations against the Communist main forces and concentrated on protecting the population,” Kissinger said. “American troops were deployed for defense in depth around major cities.”

The South Vietnamese air force doubled in size and received its first jet fighters, Northrop F-5s and Cessna A-37 attack aircraft. These new airplanes, along with propeller-driven A-1s, AC-119 gunships, and helicopters, were a significant force but they did not give South Vietnam a capability to attack North Vietnam or effectively interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Laird told the service secretaries to guard against “pressures and temptations to hold onto the reins” in Southeast Asia and issued a reminder that “the chief

mission of our forces in South Vietnam continues to be to insure the success of Vietnamization.”

The problem, a classified USAF report said, was that “the South Vietnamese were not improving as fast as the US forces were withdrawing.” They could not hope to match the capabilities and range of high-performance US fighter-bombers and B-52s. Some South Vietnamese generals were good leaders but others were chosen for their political reliability instead of their military talents.

Abrams and the South Vietnamese armed forces made considerable progress with pacification. Sorley—the harsh critic of Westmoreland and a great admirer of Abrams—notes that by 1970, “the South Vietnamese countryside had been widely pacified” and that about 90 percent of the population was under government control.

“The fighting wasn't over, but the war was won,” Sorley said. Others thought so, too. In later years, Mackubin T. Owens, a prolific author and analyst who had been a Marine Corps platoon commander in Vietnam, had a bumper sticker on his car that read, “When I left, we were winning.”

This notion of a victory ignored is still popular today. However, like McNamara's strategy decision in 1965, that proposition hangs on defining the war as an indigenous ground conflict in the south. As would be demonstrated yet again when an invasion force from North Vietnam captured Saigon in 1975, the critical challenge was always from the north.

US NEGOTIATING WITH ITSELF

North Vietnam did not wait in 1969 to see what the new Nixon Administration would do. Four weeks after Nixon took office, the communists launched a new offensive in the south, attacking 110 targets, including Saigon.

Nixon felt he had to retaliate in some way to preserve any chance of negotiating from a position of strength and ordered the bombing of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong sanctuaries in Cambodia.

The United States had been bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle since 1965, but the southern extension through Cambodia had not been struck before. Cambodia was supposedly neutral and North Vietnam denied being there.

The Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, had invited a US attack on the North Vietnamese invaders but was not willing to do so publicly. The bombing operations in Cambodia, which began in March 1969, were kept secret—at least for a while—both because of Sihanouk's



Above: A B-52 drops bombs on North Vietnam. Linebacker II convinced the North Vietnamese that their best option was to negotiate seriously. Right: Early in his presidency, Nixon ordered the bombing of sanctuaries for North Vietnamese soldiers in neighboring Cambodia. He announced it to the American people in a speech in the April 1970.

sensitivities and to avoid an uproar of protest in the United States.

Concurrently, Nixon proposed a mutual withdrawal of US and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Hanoi refused. The first increment of US troops was pulled out unilaterally in June, which fatally undercut the whole concept of mutual withdrawal.

In the spring of 1970, the nominally neutral Sihanouk was ousted by a pro-Western coup headed by Premier Lon Nol. To shore up Lon Nol's government and to complete the destruction of the sanctuaries, a combined force of 15,000 US and South Vietnamese entered Cambodia, setting off a massive wave of protest by politicians, students, and the press in the United States.

In October 1970, Nixon offered a deeper concession, a "cease-fire in place." Unlike the previous proposal for mutual withdrawal, this would allow the North Vietnamese forces already in the south to stay there while a political settlement was explored. US forces, which were going



Photo via Nixon Presidential Library & Museum

home anyway, did not figure in it. North Vietnam refused.

In December, an amendment to the defense appropriations bill prohibited the use of US ground forces in Laos or Cambodia. "Hanoi stood at the sidelines, coldly observing how America was negotiating not with its adversary but with itself," Kissinger said.

By early 1972, most of the US ground forces were gone from Vietnam. Air-

power had been reduced as well, but not by as much, and was carrying the main US part of the effort. The North Vietnamese had built warehouses in the demilitarized zone and petroleum pipelines into Laos. They had also based MiG fighters and other aircraft at bases near the DMZ, from which they could be across the border in minutes.

Le Duan, originator of the Tet attacks in 1968, was ready to try again. On March

30, 1972, in what became known as “the Easter Invasion,” the North Vietnamese launched a three-pronged attack across the DMZ and eastward out of Laos and Cambodia.

The South Vietnamese fought well, but the critical factor in stopping the invasion was US airpower, which was rapidly augmented by additional fighters and bombers. Abrams at MACV wanted all of the available airpower targeted on battles in South Vietnam, but an appreciable portion was allocated to Operation Linebacker I, which began in May and bombed the logistics infrastructure in North Vietnam.

By June, Le Duan’s venture had failed and the message was clear: North Vietnam could not successfully invade the south so long as it was defended by US airpower. Hanoi had sustained huge losses in the losing effort and its attitude was changing toward a negotiated settlement.

Nixon’s Democratic Party opponent in the upcoming presidential election, Sen. George McGovern, took a peace-at-any-price position. The *New York Times* reported that, “if elected, Mr. McGovern has said, he will order a cease-fire on Inauguration Day, remove all troops from Indochina within three months, withdraw support from the South Vietnamese government, and remove American forces from Cambodia and Laos. He says he fully expects the North Vietnamese to release American prisoners of war once these various steps are taken.”

The North Vietnamese figured that McGovern would lose and that they might get better terms from Nixon before his re-election rather than after. In September, Le Duc Tho told Kissinger that North Vietnam would agree to a cease-fire in place and release of the American POWs. Hanoi would drop its previous demand for the ouster of President Nguyen Van Thieu in South Vietnam as a precondition. This incorporated most of the elements of previous proposals by the US and South Vietnam.

Kissinger, in a burst of exuberance, announced in October that “peace is at hand.” That, however, reckoned without Thieu, who balked. He had gone along with previous US proposals only because he thought there was no chance of Hanoi accepting them. Faced with the stark reality that the Americans might actually leave Vietnam, he rejected the breakthrough in negotiations.

North Vietnam, seeing that Nixon was in a bind, back-pedaled on its offer and hardened its demands. “Hanoi had in effect made a strategic decision to prolong

the war, abort all negotiations, and at the last moment seek unconditional victory once again,” Kissinger said.

THE WEIGHT OF LINEBACKER

The prospect for extricating the United States from the war was at a standstill, and Nixon was infuriated. When Congress convened in January, it might well impose new restrictions making it more difficult to get a favorable settlement.

Seeking to break the impasse, Nixon ordered a bombing campaign, Linebacker II, heavier than anything North Vietnam had ever seen before, centered on Hanoi and Haiphong but with many targets elsewhere, including railroads, power plants, supply depots, ports, and the principal military air bases.

Between Dec. 18 and Dec. 29, Linebacker II pounded North Vietnam with 729 sorties by B-52 bombers and 769 by Air Force and Navy fighters, destroying much of the remaining industrial and military infrastructure. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai advised Hanoi to return to bargaining and “let the Americans leave as quickly as possible.”

Linebacker II had achieved its purpose. On Dec. 26, North Vietnam agreed to resume the talks.

The agreement reached in Paris in January was similar to the one Hanoi had backed away from earlier, but this time North Vietnam promised to recognize and respect the DMZ. The political future of South Vietnam would be decided in free elections under international supervision. Neither side would use Laos and Cambodia for military purposes. US forces would withdraw. The agreement said nothing about the 160,000 North Vietnamese troops left in place in the South.

Nixon notified Thieu that he had “irrevocably decided” to sign the Paris agreement. “I will do so, if necessary, alone,” Nixon said. “In that case, I shall have to explain publicly that your government obstructs peace. The result will be inevitable and immediate termination of US economic and military assistance which cannot be forestalled by a change of personnel in your government.”

Thieu had little choice but to accept, and the deal was done. The accords were signed by the United States, North and South Vietnam, and “the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam.”

THE PEACE THAT WASN’T

The cease-fire went into effect Jan. 28, 1973. The first American POWs returned Feb. 12, and the last American troops left Vietnam on March 29.

Nixon announced that “we have prevented the imposition of a communist government by force on South Vietnam.” That overstated it by a long shot, but Vietnam had been given a chance. Its armed forces had been built up considerably. The air force had over 1,000 aircraft. US economic and military aid continued, and Nixon had guaranteed Thieu that if Hanoi failed to abide by the agreement, it was his intention for the United States “to take swift and retaliatory action.”

However, Nixon would not be there to see it through. In May, the Senate began hearings on the Watergate scandal that would eventually drive Nixon from office. Well before that, Congress reneged on the assurances given to South Vietnam.

An amendment to the defense appropriations bill in July 1973 cut off funding to finance “directly or indirectly” combat operations by US forces “in or over or from off the shores of” North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Laos, or Cambodia.

Furthermore, Congress radically reduced aid to South Vietnam from \$2.27 billion in 1973 to \$700 million for 1975. In his memoirs, Nixon denounced the “tragic and irresponsible action” by Congress, which “denied, first to me, and then to President Ford, the means to enforce the Paris agreement.”

By the beginning of 1975, North Vietnam was ready to try again. Its army, built up with Soviet assistance, was now the fifth largest in the world. There was no more pretense of a home-grown insurgency by the South Vietnamese. Nor was there any need to infiltrate indirectly by way of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Twenty North Vietnamese divisions came directly across the DMZ and joined other combat forces already in the south. The invasion force included tanks and was supported by modern air defense systems that substantially weakened the ability of the South Vietnamese to resist.

Saigon fell April 30. The Provisional Revolutionary Government was dissolved—without consulting the PRG—by party leaders in the North. South Vietnam ceased to exist. There was only one Vietnam, and its capital was Hanoi. ★

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, “Chasing Pancho Villa,” appeared in the September issue.