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# VIETNAMIZATION, 1966-1973

President Richard Nixon did not set a public deadline for the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he steadfastly refused to concede to the North Vietnamese demand for one. In public, the administration insisted (until May 1972) that it would only agree to withdraw US troops if North Vietnam agreed to withdraw its forces. However, Nixon adopted an internal deadline—what one scholar has called a “secret timetable”: by 1971 he and his advisers privately “timed American military withdrawal from Vietnam to the 1972 U.S. presidential election,” not to a withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces. Nixon’s purpose was to prevent the collapse of South Vietnam before he was reelected, while reassuring voters that he was bringing the war to an end.<sup>10</sup>

These tensions were apparent from the beginning of the Nixon administration. On April 1, 1969, in a National Security Decision Memorandum, Nixon reaffirmed, “There will be no de-escalation except as an outgrowth of mutual troop withdrawal.” Yet, a few paragraphs later, he directed the development of a “Specific plan timetable [sic] for Vietnamizing the war,” or withdrawing US troops and shifting the burden to the South Vietnamese to carry on the war.<sup>11</sup> The administration squared the circle by claiming that withdrawing US forces was not “de-escalation” so long as South Vietnamese forces replaced departing US forces—a contention that was only partially justified by the South Vietnamese Army’s later performance.

In June, the Pentagon responded to the president’s tasking for a plan to complete Vietnamization. The plan presented four options for the withdrawal of US forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces over eighteen, twenty-four, thirty, and forty-two months. At this point, the administration did not envision Vietnamization as involving the total withdrawal of all US forces; the Pentagon’s initial plan still called for a residual force of nearly 267,500 US troops. The administration debated the relative merits of each option—Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird favored the twenty-four-month option—but the proposal was effectively overtaken by events.<sup>12</sup>

Before the Vietnamization plan had been fully worked out, and while the administration was still debating timetables, Nixon announced it as the major cornerstone of his strategy toward the war, in conjunction with an announcement of the first withdrawal of US troops. The initial withdrawal was more a symbolic gesture than a strategic shift—at twenty-five thousand out of five hundred and forty-five thousand troops, less than 5 percent of the total. However, in announcing the strategy of “Vietnamization,” Nixon established the withdrawal of US military forces as the basic goal of his Vietnam strategy. Indeed, he may have already jettisoned the idea of a residual stay-behind force. “Midstream into their first year in office, Nixon and [National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger had concluded that direct American involvement in the war must end,” according to Jeffrey Kimball.<sup>13</sup>

In November 1969, after a second troop-withdrawal announcement, Nixon went further. He publicly announced “a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces, and their replacement by the South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable.”<sup>14</sup> He explicitly announced that the details of that timetable would not be disclosed—“I have not and do not intend to announce the timetable for our program”—because he argued that would undermine his negotiating leverage in the Paris peace talks. He also argued the withdrawal should remain flexible, to take into account the capacities of Vietnamese forces in the north and the south. While Nixon’s plan called for a withdrawal timetable, it was to be flexible and internal, not fixed and public.

The Nixon administration was thus committed to the public rhetoric of mutual withdrawal with North Vietnam. At the same time, it was carrying out unilateral US troop withdrawals under the guise of Vietnamization. It claimed that US troops were being replaced by South Vietnamese forces, that the allies were therefore not “de-escalating” the war, and that each tranche of withdrawal was undertaken with due regard for South

9 The standard histories of the Vietnam War focus disproportionately on the war prior to 1969, including David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983); Mark Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010); George Herring, *America’s Longest War, 5th Edition* (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2013); and William S. Turley, *The Second Indochina War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986). Lewis Sorley, *A Better War* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1999), is a rare, if controversial, narrative of the war in its last stage.

10 Hughes, *Fatal Politics*.

11 Edward C. Keefer and Carolyn Yee, eds., “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970,” document 51: National Security Decision Memorandum 9, April 1, 1969, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v06>. See also Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, chapters 1–2, for a review of the Nixon administration’s deliberations on Vietnamization and withdrawal.

12 Keefer and Yee, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume VI,” documents 87, 114, and 199: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969; Memorandum from Laird to Nixon, September 4, 1969; Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, March 13, 1970.

13 Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*, 301.

14 Richard Nixon, “Address on the Vietnam War,” November 3, 1969, [https://d43fweuh3sg51.cloudfront.net/media/media\\_files/9293556c-4cd5-453b-bb32-8e74d867db87/efc05669-7718-426a-bfa4-9d7947cb5f9d.pdf](https://d43fweuh3sg51.cloudfront.net/media/media_files/9293556c-4cd5-453b-bb32-8e74d867db87/efc05669-7718-426a-bfa4-9d7947cb5f9d.pdf).



Elements of US armored units move back into combat base, September 30th, 1971. Source: Tullio Saba, flickr

Vietnamese capabilities and military progress against North Vietnam. The last claim, especially, was increasingly dubious. Some in the administration saw the de facto withdrawal policy clearly. In late 1969, during a National Security Council (NSC) meeting about the US troop withdrawals, Vice President Spiro Agnew asked, “Is there something hard-nosed we can do to show this is Vietnamization and not a bug-out?” Nixon’s only idea was to “hit the north,” presaging the bombing campaigns of 1972.<sup>15</sup> In reality, the United States was committed to a unilateral withdrawal from South Vietnam.<sup>16</sup>

After 1969, the administration’s debates about withdrawals focused on the timing and size of specific withdrawal tranches,

such as the announcement of a withdrawal of an additional one hundred and fifty thousand troops in April 1970, not on the broader strategic approach.<sup>17</sup> Policymakers’ deliberations about Vietnam were largely preoccupied by the fallout from operations in Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971, not revisiting the issue of Vietnamization or the pace of withdrawal. By September 1970, facing intense congressional pressure and stymied by the lack of military progress, Kissinger and Nixon were discussing plans for a complete withdrawal of all US forces, with no residual or stay-behind force. “We are talking about total U.S. withdrawal,” Kissinger wrote, describing to Nixon his negotiating instructions to Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, a point Nixon and Kissinger reiterated to one another

15 Keesee and Yee, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI,” document 120: Minutes of National Security Council Meeting, September 12, 1969.

16 David Schmitz argues that Nixon’s Vietnam strategy should be understood as having two distinct stages: an initial stage in which he sought escalation and victory, in 1969–70; and a second stage in which he moderated his goals and pursued negotiation and the “decent interval” in 1971–72. Schmitz’s schematic is too neat: it overlooks evidence that Nixon and Kissinger had already moved toward complete withdrawal as their goal by mid-1970, and even late 1969. Nixon’s escalatory moves in 1969, and especially in 1970, were motivated in part to compensate for, not preclude, Vietnamization and withdrawal. See David Schmitz, *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014). See also Jeffrey Kimball, “Kimball on Schmitz, ‘Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War: The End of the American Century,’” *H-Diplo*, September 2014, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/28443/reviews/41642/kimball-schmitz-richard-nixon-and-vietnam-war-end-american-century>.

17 See, for example, Kissinger’s notes for a May 31, 1970, NSC meeting (Keesee and Yee, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI,” document 312).

in private conversations a year later.<sup>18</sup> In October 1970, Nixon again addressed the nation about peace plans for Vietnam. He characterized it as a “New Initiative for Peace,” but the speech was largely a repackaging of previous announcements. Nixon said, “We are ready now to negotiate an agreed timetable for complete withdrawals as part of an overall settlement. We are prepared to withdraw all our forces as part of a settlement.”<sup>19</sup>

By the spring of 1971, if not earlier, Nixon adopted an implicit or internal deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Vietnam, centering on or around November 1972, the date of the US presidential election. As Ken Hughes and Jeffrey Kimball have shown through careful examination of Nixon’s recordings of his own conversations from 1971 onward, his reelection campaign—unsurprisingly—loomed large in his discussions about Vietnam policy. In February 1971, Nixon told Kissinger during a phone call about troop withdrawals, “It’s all got to be out by the summer of ’72.”<sup>20</sup> The next month, on another phone call, Kissinger noted the upcoming presidential election. Nixon worried that he had “too many chips on South Vietnam” and said, “if my re-election is important, let’s remember, I’ve got to get this off our plate,” suggesting his intent to secure a final resolution of the war on or before November 1972.<sup>21</sup>

Kissinger and Nixon talked frankly about the need to avoid a collapse of South Vietnam before the US election, and also the need to remove Vietnam as a political issue by appeasing public expectation for withdrawal.<sup>22</sup> Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman’s diaries document additional conversations in which Kissinger recommended timing troop withdrawals to maximize their political benefit.<sup>23</sup> And, Nixon wrote to Kissinger in March 1972 that he expected his Democratic opponent to make a campaign issue out of the remaining troops in Vietnam. He therefore believed it was “vital...that

a final announcement of some kind must be made before the Democratic convention in July...that indicates that all American combat forces have left.”<sup>24</sup>

Political considerations led to the natural conclusion that the withdrawal should be precisely timed to appear substantially complete just as voters were making up their minds—but no earlier. Indeed, in April 1971, in yet another televised address to the nation, Nixon declared “Vietnamization has succeeded,” announced his intent to accelerate the pace of troop withdrawals, and announced the withdrawal of a further one hundred thousand troops that year—to occur as the president’s reelection campaign was gearing up.<sup>25</sup> In July 1971, Kissinger told South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, “Before December 1 [1971] there would be no further troops withdrawn beyond what was planned. After that, because of our own elections, the U.S. would have to make some pretty drastic moves, but President Thiệu had always known this.”<sup>26</sup> It is notable not only that Kissinger was so open about the importance of the US presidential election, but also that he assumed its importance was so widely understood that Thiệu would already have been aware of its impact on US military decision-making. Nixon made nine troop-withdrawal announcements in 1971 and 1972, in the run-up to the election.<sup>27</sup>

Nixon and Kissinger were aware of how craven it could look if they too-obviously linked US policy in Vietnam to the US presidential election. In May 1971, Kissinger suggested offering a cease-fire to the North Vietnamese, to take effect September 1, 1972. Nixon replied, “I’d make it July 1st. If you put it September 1st it looks like you’re doing it just before the election, and for the election. See my point?”<sup>28</sup> In 1971 and 1972, Nixon and his advisers seem to have lost confidence that South Vietnam could survive without continued US help, yet

18 David Goldman and Erin Mahan, eds., “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII, Vietnam, July 1970–January 1972,” document 37: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 12, 1970, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v07>; Hughes, *Fatal Politics*, 499–500.

19 Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation About a New Initiative for Peace in Southeast Asia,” October 7, 1970.

20 Hughes, *Fatal Politics*.

21 *Ibid.*, 500.

22 *Ibid.*; Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files*.

23 Hughes, *Fatal Politics*, 3, 5.

24 Quoted in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 205.

25 Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia,” April 7, 1971, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/april-7-1971-address-nation-situation-southeast-asia>.

26 Goldman and Mahan, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII,” document 231: Memorandum of Conversation, July 4, 1971.

27 Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 49.

28 Goldman and Mahan, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII,” document 200: Conversation Between Nixon and Kissinger, May 10, 1971.

they remained even more committed to their policy of unilateral US withdrawal.<sup>29</sup> The solution was to withdraw slowly enough to forestall a South Vietnamese collapse, but quickly enough for Nixon's reelection campaign. This supports the "decent interval" thesis: withdrawal was not a strategy for securing US interests, but for accepting defeat gracefully, in a politically affordable manner. By September 1971, Kissinger could write that the United States was "head[ing] into the terminal phase of our involvement."<sup>30</sup>

Nixon made the achievement of peace, and the end of the US role in Vietnam, a centerpiece of his reelection campaign. During his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in August 1972, he said, "Standing in this Convention Hall four years ago, I pledged to seek an honorable end to the war in Vietnam. We have made great progress toward that end. We have brought over half a million men home, and more will be coming home. We have ended America's ground combat role."<sup>31</sup> Kissinger reassured the American people that "peace is at hand" on October 26, 1972, twelve days before the presidential election.

The result was that virtually all US forces withdrew from Vietnam by November 1972—leaving behind a residual force of some sixteen thousand US military advisers. The Paris Peace Accords, signed in January 1973, mandated a complete withdrawal of all US military personnel, who were subsequently withdrawn by the end of March, months into Nixon's second term. The administration claimed for four years that it would not unilaterally withdraw from Vietnam, while simultaneously planning for and doing exactly that.

## POLICYMAKERS' BELIEFS ABOUT THE WITHDRAWAL

What did Nixon and his advisers believe the withdrawal would accomplish? First and foremost, they believed that withdrawing troops was necessary to sustain US support for the war—or, at least, to prevent further erosion of support for it. They believed the war carried a high "audience cost," which withdrawal would help lower (and, if the war was lost, the withdrawal would help shift blame onto the Vietnamese and minimize the political cost to the administration).<sup>32</sup> Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird told Nixon that announcing the first increment of troop withdrawals in June 1969 would not appease critics of the war, "but important elements of the US public would be encouraged."<sup>33</sup> That September, Kissinger wrote to Nixon, "We are well aware of the popular pressures for a prompt settlement of the war," and offered that one way to "buy time with the American public" was to "phase out American presence in South Vietnam."<sup>34</sup> During discussions of US troop withdrawals, Secretary of State William Rogers told an NSC meeting in September 1969, "If we go ahead with reductions, we will get public support...If they think we are going for a military victory the public will leave us. They must know we have a program" for withdrawal.<sup>35</sup>

In April 1971, Kissinger wrote to Nixon, "The extent of the U.S. withdrawal by mid-1972 must be a finely adjusted balance between the maximum allowable by U.S. domestic pressures and the minimum required 'to demonstrate visibly to the Vietnamese that U.S. support is still available.'"<sup>36</sup> Later that year, in September, he again wrote to Nixon that Vietnamization had succeeded at "buying time at home with the steady decline

29 Nixon and Kissinger went back and forth on this point in 1971 and 1972, sometimes denying they were abandoning South Vietnam to its fate, and other times acknowledging that was the practical result of their policy. By looking at the pattern of behavior and choices, it is clear that US withdrawal without adequate protections for South Vietnam was their revealed preference.

30 Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 257: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 18, 1971.

31 Richard Nixon, "Remarks on Accepting the Presidential Nomination of the Republican National Convention," August 23, 1972, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/ppotpus/4731812.1972.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

32 Interestingly, the audience cost works in reverse to what James Fearon identified in his work. He explored the audience cost of backing down in a crisis, whereas Nixon and Kissinger feared the cost of staying in. See James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, 3 (1994), 577–592, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2944796?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2944796?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents). Bronwyn Lewis argued that audience costs mattered less to Nixon than conventionally believed based on his support for the "decent interval" thesis. But the fact that Nixon and Kissinger believed a decent interval was necessary—as opposed to letting South Vietnam collapse abruptly and swiftly—supports the thesis that they were concerned about the cost of public perception of losing the war on their watch, as is amply supported by the primary sources. See his essay in "Audience Costs and the Vietnam War," H-Diplo/ISSF Forum, November 7, 2014.

33 Keefer and Yee, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI," document 87: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969.

34 Ibid., document 119: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 11, 1969.

35 Ibid., document 120: Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, September 12, 1969.

36 Goldman and Mahan, "Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII," document 189: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, April 23, 1971.

of U.S. forces, casualties, and expenses.”<sup>37</sup> Also, Nixon and Kissinger’s recorded conversations are replete with their concerns about the political implications of the war and the necessity of withdrawal. At the same time, they worried about setting a fixed, public, and final deadline for withdrawal. As Kissinger later argued, “How would any administration explain to American families why their sons’ lives should be at risk when a fixed schedule for total withdrawal existed?”<sup>38</sup>

Second, Nixon and his team also believed withdrawal was necessary to accelerate military progress and pressure the South Vietnamese government to improve its performance. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) “Objectives Plan” of 1969 explicitly stated, “the reduction of American forces is required, not simply to ‘buy’ time, but also as a necessary method of compelling the South Vietnamese to take over the war.”<sup>39</sup> Laird argued in a memo to Nixon that the initial withdrawals would prompt the South Vietnamese “to understand that we are indeed serious about Vietnamizing the war.”<sup>40</sup> In February 1971, Kissinger discussed the merits of a cease-fire proposal, saying, “We can then tell the South Vietnamese, they have a year without war to build up.”<sup>41</sup> Policymakers hoped the “shadow of the future”—the knowledge of imminent US departure—would positively influence Vietnamese decision-making in the present.<sup>42</sup>

Policymakers were aware of the military risks of withdrawal, which is why they resisted committing to a public and complete withdrawal. Laird worried that even a slow withdrawal “would probably result in interruption of pacification progress,” according to a memo Kissinger wrote to Nixon in June 1969. Kissinger shared his own view, that “a much faster withdrawal could result in more serious problems for pacification and allied military capabilities, as well as possible adverse effects on the GVN [government of South Vietnam].”<sup>43</sup> The next month, Nixon asked Ambassador Bunker if South Vietnam could survive the withdrawal of US troops. Bunker replied, according to the shorthand transcript,

“Depends on speed and adequate psychological preparation. But if impression we on a rigid timetable could have disastrous effects.”<sup>44</sup>

In September, Kissinger again wrote to Nixon, “We can drag out the *troop replacement* program [i.e., Vietnamization], thus bolstering the GVN’s military position. *However*, this would postpone the withdrawal of all non-South Vietnamese forces from the country and feed dissent in the United States.” He continued, “*US troop withdrawals*, if pressed too rapidly, could both undermine the GVN politically and the allied position militarily. Again, the enemy could conclude that it need only wait for our complete withdrawal.”<sup>45</sup> Kissinger again warned in April 1971, “We do not want to risk the nightmare of having the situation in Vietnam come apart under the impact of continued U.S. withdrawals.”<sup>46</sup> Nixon asked Laird in January 1972 if the pace of withdrawal was too fast, concerned that it would “leave [the South Vietnamese] vulnerable to a major North Vietnamese attack following our withdrawal.”<sup>47</sup>

Finally, policymakers were also aware of the diplomatic cost of the withdrawal. Reflecting years later, Kissinger wrote, “the issue was the tactical judgment whether an announcement would help or hinder extrication from the war. For better or worse, our judgment was that a public announcement would destroy the last incentives for Hanoi to negotiate; it would then simply outwait us.”<sup>48</sup> As Nixon clearly said in his April 1971 address (and, with variations, in most of his public addresses on the war):

“If the United States should announce that we will quit regardless of what the enemy does, we would have thrown away our principal bargaining counter to win the release of American prisoners of war, we would remove the enemy’s strongest incentive to end the war sooner by negotiation, and we will have given enemy commanders the exact information they need to marshal their attacks against our remaining forces at their most vulnerable time.”<sup>49</sup>

37 Ibid., document 257: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 18, 1971.

38 Ibid., 96.

39 Quoted in Sorley, *A Better War*, 113.

40 Keefer and Yee, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI,” document 87: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969.

41 Quoted in Kimball, *Vietnam War Files*, 144.

42 Jan B. Heide and Anne S. Miner, “The Shadow of the Future: Effects of Anticipated Interaction and Frequency of Contact on Buyer-Seller Cooperation.” *Academy of Management Journal* 35, 2 (1992), 265–291, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1992-37288-001>.

43 Keefer and Yee, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VI,” document 87: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, June 23, 1969.

44 Ibid., document 102: Memorandum of Conversation, July 29, 1969.

45 Ibid., document 119: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, September 11, 1969.

46 Goldman and Mahan, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969–1976, Volume VII,” document 179: Minutes of a Meeting of the Senior Review Group, April 13, 1971.

47 Ibid., document 289: Memorandum for the President’s File by Haig, January 13, 1972.

48 Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

49 Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Southeast Asia.”

In other words, balanced against the audience cost at home, policymakers worried that withdrawal would exact a high price in reputational costs abroad, depriving them of negotiating leverage. The withdrawal, then, could be seen as policymakers' attempt to recalibrate the balance of costs, lowering audience costs while accepting a higher price in reputational costs. Unfortunately, it worked in a way counter to Nixon's and Kissinger's hopes, making an end to the war harder, rather than easier. It was essentially a tradeoff between short-term and long-term gains: lower audience costs made it easier to initiate or continue the war, while higher reputational costs made it harder to conclude the war on favorable terms.

## THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON PUBLIC OPINION

What did the US withdrawal from Vietnam accomplish? Were policymakers' beliefs about the effects of the withdrawal justified? First, there is little evidence that Vietnamization or the withdrawal of US troops had an effect on public support for the war. In September 1969, shortly after Nixon first announced troop withdrawals, 58 percent of Americans believed the United States "made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam," compared to 32 percent who disagreed. Three and a half years later, when the Paris Accords were signed and the withdrawal nearly complete, the figures were essentially unchanged: 60 percent versus 29 percent. A different set of polls showed a steady decline in support for the war, from 39 percent in February 1969 to 28 percent in May 1971.<sup>50</sup> It may be that troop withdrawals slowed the erosion of support, but it is clear that Nixon's strategy failed in his basic goal of retaining enough support to prosecute the war. The fall of Saigon and the passage of time have only deepened Americans' judgment on the war: In 1990, 74 percent of Americans believed the war had been a mistake.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, the public's view of Nixon's handling of the war is not positively correlated to the withdrawal of US troops. Approval for his handling of the war swung from 45 percent to 64 percent in the final months of 1969—after Nixon had announced the strategy of Vietnamization, but well before major troop withdrawals began, suggesting the public was initially optimistic when it heard about Nixon's approach but before seeing it in action. Support plunged to one of its lowest points in April 1970, likely in response to the US incursion into

Cambodia—and despite Nixon's simultaneous announcement of the withdrawal of one hundred and fifty thousand troops.

During the phase of major troop withdrawals from 1970–72, if Nixon's assumption was correct that the public would support the war as he withdrew troops, public-opinion polls should have shown either a steady increase in public support as troops steadily withdrew, a short-term improvement to his withdrawal announcements, or, at least, a halt to the decrease in public support. Instead, the approval of Nixon's handling of the war see-sawed between 41 and 58 percent, with no discernable long-term trend and no clear connection to his withdrawal announcements. Approval then spiked to 75 percent in January 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed. Public opinion seemed more tightly tied to military and political developments than to announcements of troop withdrawals, rising with Nixon's initial announcement of his Vietnamization strategy and with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, but dropping during the Cambodia incursion and the Easter Offensive.<sup>52</sup>

Americans' views about the war split along party lines, but trends remained similar. More Democrats favored the war under Lyndon Johnson, and more Republicans under Nixon—but support for the war persistently fell among both groups. More Republicans than Democrats favored escalation over withdrawal, but escalation lost favor with both groups after 1966. Similarly, more Democrats favored withdrawal, but even Republicans favored withdrawal over escalation by 1970, suggesting the president had little room to maneuver.<sup>53</sup>

## THE EFFECT OF WITHDRAWAL ON POLITICAL AND MILITARY GOALS

The independent effect of the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam is difficult to isolate because (as in Afghanistan) it happened simultaneously with an escalation in military effort (such as training the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), invading Cambodia, and bombing North Vietnam) and a change in military strategy (the increased emphasis on counterinsurgency and pacification). Of course, the United States' choices in prosecuting its war in Vietnam are among the most contested in the fields of military and diplomatic history and international relations. While a full survey of the debate is impossible, the ultimate outcome is not in dispute: the net effect

50 William L. Lurch and Peter W. Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam," *Western Political Quarterly* 32, 1 (1979): 21–44, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/106591297903200104>.

51 Lydia Saad, "Gallup Vault: Hawk vs. Doves on Vietnam," Gallup, May 24, 2016, [http://www.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx?g\\_source=vietnam&g\\_medium=search&g\\_campaign=tiles](http://www.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx?g_source=vietnam&g_medium=search&g_campaign=tiles).

52 Joseph Carroll, "The Iraq-Vietnam Comparison," Gallup, June 15, 2004, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/11998/iraqvietnam-comparison.aspx>.

53 Lurch and Sperlich, "American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam."

of escalation, withdrawal, and strategic shift was ultimately unsuccessful. In the midst of the United States' overall political and military failure, the withdrawal plans contributed to, rather than mitigated, that failure.

The Vietnamization strategy succeeded in continuing the growth of the ARVN, but did not accelerate the pace of growth. The US-trained South Vietnamese Army grew from one hundred and fifty thousand in 1950 to more than one million in 1975, including more than half a million regional and local units. However, most of the growth happened before 1969, when the army had already grown to around 880,000. Vietnamization improved the ARVN's equipment and tactical proficiency, as the US Army intensified its efforts to transfer weapons and equipment and train small units in combat effectiveness. "The Vietnamization program...gradually transformed the ARVN into one of the largest and best-equipped militaries in the world," according to one historian.<sup>54</sup> ARVN ground forces were capable enough to blunt North Vietnam's Easter Offensive in the spring of 1972, with US air and naval support. The ARVN, however, never surmounted serious problems with corruption, untrained leadership, mass desertion, and sectarianism (between Buddhists and Catholics), and it remained dependent on US support to the last.<sup>55</sup>

US counterinsurgency efforts showed similar promise late in the war. The United States formed the Office of Civil Operations and Revolutions Development Support (CORDS) in 1967, and General Creighton Abrams began to introduce changes to the US force structure and campaign strategy after he assumed command in June 1968. Abrams pressed his commanders to reexamine when they truly needed to use artillery, aerial bombardment, and other highly kinetic tactics and weapons systems.<sup>56</sup> He accelerated pacification and counterinsurgency efforts in 1969, and succeeded in improving rural security, dismantling insurgent infrastructure, and expanding rural defense forces in much of the South

Vietnamese countryside by late 1970; some estimates put the proportion of the South Vietnamese population isolated from insurgents at 90 percent.<sup>57</sup> By early 1970, "most observers agreed that significant gains had been made," according to historian George Herring.<sup>58</sup> Another historian, William Turley, wrote that, "Under the combined pressure of 500,000 U.S. troops, a growing ARVN, and accelerated pacification, the Communists had been unable to recover from losses suffered in the 1968 offensive."<sup>59</sup>

These military developments added up to some strategic gains. The North Vietnamese had long insisted on the removal of the South Vietnamese government led by Thiệu. Following the failure of the 1972 offensive, they dropped that condition, and negotiations proceeded much more quickly. It is easy to dismiss the substance of the North Vietnamese concession, because of the knowledge that the Thiệu government fell anyway, but the North Vietnamese felt it was meaningful enough that they resisted it for as long as they could. Furthermore, the US and South Vietnamese military position helped delay the end of the war until US-Soviet and US-Chinese relations were more favorable—one of Nixon's explicit hopes for the withdrawal. "For the United States, the Vietnam War was never about Vietnam, but rather about its impact on the Cold War. And here, the time gained was put to good use," according to Robert Jervis.<sup>60</sup> The withdrawal did, indeed, allow Nixon to focus on his other major foreign policy priorities. (The counterfactual, however, is at least worth considering: how would US-Chinese relations have been affected by a sustained presence in a stable and independent South Vietnam past 1973?)

Regardless, the ability of US and South Vietnamese commanders to exploit these successes was limited by the overwhelming pressure to withdraw US forces. Because Nixon was intent on withdrawing troops, he "bestowed on MACV a mission well outside its capacity to accomplish," in Gregory A. Daddis' assessment.<sup>61</sup> This was the natural consequence

54 Lawrence, *The Vietnam War*, 144.

55 Spencer C. Tucker, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War, Vol. II* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 776. See also Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1995), 196. See also Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 70–71.

56 Sorley, *A Better War*, 219; Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 56–58; Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*. Gregory A. Daddis and Andrew Birtle have argued that the extent of Abrams' change in US military strategy has been exaggerated. As with most such arguments, there are always elements of continuity mixed with discontinuity, but there would be no argument at all if there were not some clear element of discontinuity to frame the debate. The argument here is not about the extent of Abrams' change to US strategy, but that the simultaneous withdrawal undermined whatever promise his changes may have held. See Daddis, *Withdrawal*; and Andrew J. Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Military History* 72, 4 (2008), 1213–1247.

57 Sorley, *A Better War*, 59–79 and 217–227. Herring echoes Sorley's judgments about Abrams' new direction; see Herring, *America's Longest War*, 284–285.

58 Herring, *America's Longest War*, 285.

59 Turley, *The Second Indochina War*, 126.

60 Robert Jervis, "The Politics of Troops Withdrawal: Salted Peanuts, the Commitment Trap, and Buying Time," *Diplomatic History* 34, 3 (2010), 515, <https://academic.oup.com/dh/issue/34/3>.

61 Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 47.



of the “opposing imperatives” of “troop withdrawals” and “the necessity of fighting an ongoing war,” among other things.<sup>62</sup> Put another way, the war put “national policy and military strategy at odds with each other.”<sup>63</sup> As George Herring summarized, US officials believed that “gains in security had resulted from U.S. military operations and the enemy stand-down,” but it was unclear if the gains “could be sustained in the face of the withdrawal of U.S. forces” and the concomitant resumption of enemy offensives.<sup>64</sup>

This is evident in both the conventional and unconventional aspects of the war. One South Vietnamese general later reflected, “By far the widest loophole of the Vietnamization program was its failure to provide the [South Vietnamese Army] with enough time for an overall improvement.”<sup>65</sup> The withdrawal also had a psychological effect on the South Vietnamese. Especially late in the war, South Vietnamese officials expressed a sense of betrayal and abandonment, accusing the United States of failing to live up to its promises.<sup>66</sup> Such beliefs surely contributed to a loss of morale among South Vietnamese policymakers and senior military leaders, and may have played a role in the loss of unit cohesion in the ARVN’s final months. Conversely, the US withdrawal likely encouraged North Vietnam to persist, and may have helped drag out the Paris talks. In material terms, the absence of US forces from the theater after 1972 left South Vietnamese forces without adequate air cover and with deficiencies in logistics, intelligence, and other combat-support functions. The clearest evidence is that, with US airpower, the South Vietnamese were (just) able to withstand the North Vietnamese offensive in 1972; without that support, they failed to turn back the final offensive in 1975.

In the unconventional war, counterinsurgency and pacification efforts were late additions to the US war effort. By the time they were seriously integrated into US campaign plans, the troop withdrawal was well under way, which deprived

counterinsurgency and pacification efforts of the opportunity for success. “In the period leading up to direct U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War, the Army failed to structure its forces for counterinsurgency contingencies,” according to Andrew Krepinevich.<sup>67</sup> As a result, despite the large numbers of US forces participating in the conflict as its height, most were engaged in large-scale conventional operations, not counterinsurgency. Krepinevich and others have argued this approach was a leading cause of the failure of US military efforts: “In roaming the countryside in search of targets for its unparalleled firepower, the Army ignored the basic requirement of counterinsurgency: a secure population committed to the government.”<sup>68</sup>

Even at its height, CORDS was a tiny effort, comprising fewer than ten thousand US soldiers and civilians. The “focus was so overwhelmingly on the big-unit war that the resources devoted to these counterinsurgency operations—the ‘other’ war—were insufficient for the task at hand,” according to Krepinevich. “If the Army had followed a counterinsurgency strategy, both the human and financial costs of the war would have been significantly lower. This, in turn, would have assisted to some extent in maintaining popular support in the United States.”<sup>69</sup> However, US Army leaders and national policymakers did not have clear evidence of the potential of successful counterinsurgency and pacification efforts until 1970, by which time they were unable to take full advantage of them, because of the imperative to withdraw from the conflict altogether.

US commanders were aware of the risk troop withdrawals imposed on military operations, and generally opposed them.<sup>70</sup> Abrams was not consulted on the policy of Vietnamization. While he never requested additional troops, he opposed their withdrawal and the reduction in funding for pacification programs.<sup>71</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff advised Laird in 1969 that neither “the military situation nor the [ARVN’s] capabilities” justified Vietnamization and US withdrawals.<sup>72</sup> Abrams

62 Ibid., 11.

63 Ibid., 46.

64 Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 286. See also, Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 91.

65 Quoted in Willbanks, *Abandoning Vietnam*, 278–279.

66 Bernard Weinraub, “Irate South Vietnamese Charge a Betrayal by Washington,” *New York Times*, March 30, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/03/30/archives/irate-south-vietnamese-charge-a-betrayal-by-washington.html>.

67 Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 127.

68 Ibid., 197.

69 Ibid., 215, 233.

70 Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 61.

71 Sorley, *A Better War*, 128, 176, 179.

72 Quoted in Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 73.

warned again in the spring of 1971, “Premature or hasty withdrawal contains significant military risk and courts certain North Vietnamese exaggerated claims of South Vietnamese defeat.”<sup>73</sup> He “watched helplessly as his resources diminished with every soldier who redeployed home” and believed that “the unilateral US withdrawal was working against the crucial goal of improving South Vietnam’s armed forces.”<sup>74</sup>

One of Abrams’ concerns, often overlooked by critics and later scholars, was the effect of withdrawal of the fighting capacity and morale of the remaining troops. “Ultimately the major impact of the drawdown of American forces was not the loss of combat power or support capability, serious though they were, but rather its effect on the morale and discipline of the remaining troops.”<sup>75</sup> It is hard for soldiers to understand why they should continue to take risks when they believe their government has already decided to end the war.

Kissinger, at least, seemed to recognize the looming problem. In a June 1971 meeting of the Senior Review Group, he interrogated the group about the “main force ratio” (MFR)—the ratio between allied and enemy strength—as US forces withdrew. Officially, Vietnamization meant that South Vietnamese forces were replacing US forces, leading to no drop in the MFR. By mid-1971, it was apparent that was not the case.

“If the ratios drop, there will be certain consequences unless there are compensating factors. If you say that a drop in MFRs will be made up by [increased] firepower and mobility, that argument I can understand. On the other hand, if you say that there will be a decline in MFRs, while *firepower and mobility, as a result of U.S. withdrawals, are declining*—or at least

certainly not increasing, then I fail to see why we don’t have a problem. All the evidence I have seen indicates that firepower and mobility in mid-1972 will be less. What’s wrong with this analytical point?”<sup>76</sup>

The United States and South Vietnam made real military progress in the final years of the war—but the US withdrawal gradually decreased the overall combat power available to the allies, with predictable results both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table. “Political grand strategy fashioned in Washington trumped military strategy conceived and implemented in South Vietnam,” as Gregory Daddis argued in a recent reassessment of the war’s final years.<sup>77</sup> Recognizing this does not require endorsing the “lost victory” thesis that some scholars have advanced.<sup>78</sup> Many other factors—above all, the corruption, incompetence, and illegitimacy of the South Vietnamese government—contributed to South Vietnam’s defeat. This paper is interested in a narrower question: not whether the Vietnam war was, in fact, ultimately winnable, but what impact the timing and pace of the American withdrawal had on the military and political situation. It may be that the United States would still have achieved a suboptimal outcome even with a slower withdrawal or no timetable, but it may have been *less* suboptimal. Because of the withdrawal and the loss of combat power, the United States and South Vietnam lost ground militarily. Because they lost ground militarily, they had less bargaining leverage at the negotiating table, with the result that the United States was ultimately forced to give up its main negotiating goal: the withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Policymakers’ fears about the possible consequences of a unilateral US withdrawal from South Vietnam proved prescient.

73 Goldman and Mahan, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII,” document 150: Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, March 15, 1971.

74 Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 114.

75 Sorley, *A Better War*, 289.

76 Goldman and Mahan, “Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume VII,” document 216: Minutes of a Meeting of the Senior Review Group, June 9, 1971. Emphasis added.

77 Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 10.

78 Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War 1954–1965* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sorley, *A Better War*.