

Vietnamization and its effects essay



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Vietnamization and it's Lasting Effects on South Vietnam and it's Fall

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Background

Vietnam was a country that was far removed from the American people until their history and ours became forever interlinked in what has come to be known as the Vietnam conflict. It is a classic story of good guys versus bad, communism versus freedom, and a constant struggle for stability. America's attempt to aid the cause of freedom was a valid one, but one that ended up with South Vietnam being dependent upon us for its very life as a nation." Vietnamization" was the name for the plan to allow South Vietnam to stand on its own, and ended in leaving a country totally on its own, unable to stand and fight.

Vietnam was a French territory until the Viet Minh insurgency of the late 1940's and through 1954. Although regarding this uprising as part of a larger Communist conspiracy, Americans were not unsympathetic to Vietnamese aspirations for national independence.

The ensuing defeat of the French brought an end to the first stage of what was to be a thirty year struggle. The Indochina ceasefire

agreement (Geneva Accords) of July 21, 1954 led to the creation of separate states in Laos and Cambodia, and the artificial division of Vietnam into two republics. In the North the Communist Viet Minh established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and in the south a random collection of non-Communist factions, led by Ngo Dinh Diem, formed the Republic of Vietnam. The general elections provided for by the agreement never took place, and the two states quickly drew apart. The United States immediately threw its support behind the southern regime and extended military aid through a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) under the command of Lt. General John W. O'Daniel.

American objectives in South Vietnam were relatively simple and remained so — the establishment and preservation of a non-Communist government in South Vietnam. Initially, the most pressing problem was the weakness of the Saigon government and the danger of civil war between South Vietnam's armed religious and political factions. Diem, however, acting as a kind of benevolent dictator, managed to put a

working government together, and O'Daniel's advisory group, about three or four hundred people, went to work creating a national army.

Slowly, under the direction of O'Daniel and his successor in October 1955, Lt. General Samuel T. Williams, the new army took shape. The

primary mission of this 150, 000 man force was to repel a North

Vietnamese invasion across the Demilitarised zone that separated North

and South Vietnam. Diem and his American advisors thus organised and

trained the new army for a Korean – style conflict, rather than

for the unconventional guerrilla warfare that had characterised the

earlier French – Viet Minh struggle. President Minh also maintained a

substantial paramilitary force almost as large as the regular army.

This force's primary task was to maintain internal security, but also

acted as a counter weight to the army, whose officers often had

political ambitions that were sometimes incompatible with those of

Diem. From the beginning, such tensions weakened the Saigon

government and severely hampered its ability to deal with South

Vietnam's social and economic problems.

At the beginning of 1968 the military strength of the Saigon government was, on paper, impressive. The regular armed forces consisted of about 250, 000 men, organised into a conventional army, navy, air force, and marine corps, well equipped with tanks, artillery, ships and aircraft. Behind the regulars was a similar - size militia - like organization, the Territorial forces. Although consisting mainly of small rifle units, the territorials had begun to receive modern radios, vehicles, and small arms during the early 1960's, and their capabilities had increased considerably. The organization of the armed forces mirrored most Western nations; a civilian Ministry of Defence directed a military general staff which headed a hierarchy of operational commands and various support and training facilities. The Territorial Forces, a formal part of the armed force since 1964, was apportioned among the forty - four province chiefs, the principle administrators of Vietnam. In comparison, the Viet Cong army looked pretty weak. With some 80, 000 lightly equipped regulars, back by about 80, 000 - 100, 000 part

- time guerrillas and supported by a few thousand North Vietnamese troops and a fragile supply line hundreds of miles long, it was hardly

an imposing force. Nevertheless, this force had inflicted a series of defeats on the South Vietnamese troops, all but throwing them out of the countryside and back into the cities and towns. Vietnamization

In the spring of 1969 President Richard M. Nixon initiated his

new policy of "Vietnamization." Vietnamization had two distinct

elements: first, the unilateral withdrawal of American troops from

South Vietnam; and, second, the assumption of greater military

responsibilities by the South Vietnamese armed forces to make up for

that loss. Military planners had based previous withdrawal plans on

reductions in enemy forces. Vietnamization rested on the twin

assumptions that the combatants would not reach any kind of political

settlement, or understanding, and that the fighting in the South would

continue without any voluntary reduction in enemy force levels.

Although in theory the subsequent withdrawal of American troops

depended on improvements in South Vietnamese military capabilities and

the level of combat activity, in practice the timing and size of the withdrawals were highly political decisions made in the United States.

Senior advisors in Vietnam were asked for their opinions on South Vietnam's ability to handle a Viet Cong threat, or a combined Viet Cong - North Vietnamese threat, and their answers were for the most part the same. They agreed that South Vietnam would be able to "contain" a Viet Cong threat except in the III Corps Tactical zone, where continued American air and artillery support would be needed.

Against a combined threat, however, all doubted that the South Vietnamese could do little more than hold their own, and judged their offensive capabilities marginal at best. Although they made no recommendations as to how the South Vietnamese could deal with either a Viet Cong or a combined threat, and suggested no changes in their military organization or strategy, all saw a pressing need for more air, artillery, and logistical support, and more attention to training and retaining troops. Most recommended more promotions based on merit, and more stationing of troops near home to reduce desertions.

Phasing the American troops out of Vietnam could take no less than five years was often mentioned. The four senior advisors were hopeful that the South Vietnamese could eventually deal with the insurgency by themselves, but none felt that they could handle a conventional North Vietnamese threat or a combined Viet Cong – North Vietnam opponent.

On March 5, 1969, Melvin R. Laird, Nixon's new secretary of defence, visited Saigon, accompanied by General Wheeler. Briefed by the MACV (United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) on the situation in Vietnam, Laird declared his satisfaction with the progress that had been made, both in the war effort and in the South Vietnamese armed forces, and instructed Abrams (commander of the MACV) to accelerate all programs turning over the war to Saigon. He returned to Washington, and his determination to effect a major change in American policy toward the war in Vietnam remained fixed. In subsequent discussions with Nixon, Henry Kissinger (the president's special assistant for national security, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he pursued this goal vigorously, presently persuading the

president to embark on a policy of what he called “ Vietnamization” — turning the ground war over to the South Vietnamese.

On April 10, Kissenger, with the approval of the president, directed Laird to prepare a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war. The plan was to cover all aspects of U. S. military, para - military, and civilian involvement in Vietnam, including combat and combat support forces, advisory personnell, and all forms of equipment. Neither a further expansion of the South Vietnamese armed forces nor the withdrawl of the North Vietnamese Army was envisioned. Instead, through phased troop withdrawals, the American military presence in Vietnam was to be reduced to a support and advisory mission. Troop withdrawals were to begin July 1, 1969, with alternative completion dates of December 1970, June 1971, and December 1972. Kissenger requested an initial overall report outline by June 1. Thus, despite the divergent U. S. agencies involved in the war effort and despite the unanimous opinion of these same agencies that the South Vietnamese could never deal with a combined Viet Cong -

North Vietnamese Army threat, the new administration had instructed the American military command to develop plans for turning over almost the entire ground war to the South Vietnamese. Toward the end of 1969, the first American troops left Vietnam, never to return.

Withdrawal

The withdrawal of U. S. military forces from South Vietnam continued throughout 1971 and 1972 almost without a break in stride. American military strength passed through the residual support phase sometime in 1971, and in April, 1972 MACV began planning for a possible total U. S. withdrawal as early as November 1973. As American troops redeployed, Vietnamization, the expansion of South Vietnamese military responsibilities, marched steadily forward. The period was marked by heavy combat. South Vietnamese cross - border operations into Cambodia and Laos in 1971 met stiff opposition, and in early 1972 were countered by the North Vietnamese "Easter" offensive into South Vietnam. Fighting was intense, casualties and equipment losses were high, and the nature of the combat was more or less

conventional. Guerrilla warfare behind South Vietnamese lines was negligible, while use of tanks, long – range artillery, and sophisticated missiles became commonplace.

As American combat units left South Vietnam and the South Vietnamese assumed responsibility for the war, many advisors felt their work load increasing. In September 1971, General Abrams (commander of the MACV) directed that the current advisory effort focus primarily on management of support programs and revolutionary development. The South Vietnamese regulars, he felt, were performing reasonably well in the field and needed little operational advice.

Assistance was most needed in areas of command and control, personnel, logistics, training, communications, electronics, and in intelligence.

On the civilian side assistance was needed in areas of local self – defence, self – government, and economic self – development. He also pointed out that the advisory effort was not being slighted. By the end of the year, 66 percent of the U. S. military forces would have left Vietnam, while the total advisory effort would have only declined

22 percent. This would be primarily done by reducing the size and number of the tactical detachments.

The combat assistance teams in the field had begun disappearing even before 1972. With the exception of the airborne advisors and some teams in the northern corps, MACV closed out all of the battalion teams by June 30, 1971, and began phasing out the regimental teams by September. By the end of the year, the U. S. Army tactical advisory strength had fallen from 5,416 to 3,888, and MACV staff strength from 1,894 to 1,395 and many were military cadre from leaving American units trying to complete their twelve month tours.

During 1972 General Abrams, and his successor in June, General Fredrick C. Weyand, threw the weight of the advisory effort into a succession of material supply projects that enabled the South Vietnamese to complete existing modernization programs; to make up for heavy combat losses; to create new units, and to fill their depots with munitions, fuel, spare parts, and other supplies. The eventual result was a massive sea and airlift between October 23 and December 12

1972 that brought over 105, 000 major items of equipment to South Vietnam, about 5, 000 tons by air and the rest by sea.

In the field of supply the most critical and the most costly item in the South Vietnamese inventory was ammunition. In 1972, under MACV guidance, the Central Logistics Command established a more detailed system to monitor the status of all munitions: base, field, and unit depot stockage; unit expenditures; and ammunition maintenance. Unused ammunition was subject to rapid deterioration and had to be examined periodically and, if necessary, reconditioned or destroyed. Stockage levels in each ammunition category were critical. Munitions stocks increased from 79, 000 short tons in January 1969 to 146, 900 in January 1972 and 165, 700 in January 1973. However, a normal monthly expenditure rate of 33, 000 short tons, which could rise to over 100, 000 short tons per month in periods of intense combat, made continued resupply by the United States vital. Another potential problem was the vulnerability of ammunition dumps; the enemy had destroyed over 24, 000 short tons of depot ammunition during the

Easter offensive alone. The South Vietnamese would have to maintain, protect, and ration their existing stocks as carefully as possible.

Following the Easter offensive of 1972, MACV and the Joint Chiefs of Staff suddenly decided that further additions had to be made. These included two more M48 tank battalions; two additional air defence and three more 175-mm. self - propelled artillery battalions; crews for one hundred sophisticated antitank missile launchers; and, for the South Vietnamese Air Force, thirteen aviation squadrons. The new air units represented a major expansion and included aircraft for two more squadrons of heavy CH-47, three of A-37 jet fighter bombers, two of large C130 transports, and five of F5 jet fighters. Perhaps anticipating some kind of agreement in Paris, the Department of Defence agreed to ship this material to South Vietnam as soon as possible under the code name Project ENHANCE and to raise and train units and crews at some later date. At the same time, in order to strengthen the territorials, MACV authorised more Regional Forces battalions and enlarged province tactical staffs to provide better

command and control.

To create these new units without violating the 1.1 million troop ceiling, MACV and the Joint General Staff again made compensatory reductions in Popular Forces strength. Fall of Vietnam It took almost one year for the North Vietnamese to rebuild their strength and launch their own major offensive. On March 30 1972 three North Vietnamese Army divisions crossed the Demilitarised Zone in northern South Vietnam, overrunning advance bases of the new South Vietnamese 3d Division; three days later, three more enemy divisions headed south across the Cambodian border towards Saigon, surrounding positions held by the 5th Division in the III Corps Tactical Zone, and two weeks after that, two other divisions attacked the 22nd Infantry Division in the Highlands, while smaller units struck at towns in Binh Dinh Province along the coast. Because of the timing of the attacks, they were quickly called the “Easter Offensive.” Through all of this, the North Vietnamese had only won two district towns, Loc Ninh, near the Cambodian border, and Dong Ha, opposite the Demilitarised zone, a

small showing for the heavy prices they paid.

The ceasefire agreement of January 23 1973 marked an end to the American policy of Vietnamization. The agreement specified the complete withdrawal of all American military forces from South Vietnam, including advisors, and the end of all U. S. military actions in support of Saigon. The North Vietnamese, in turn, agreed to put a ceasefire in place, the return of American Prisoners of War, and an end to infiltration in the South. The accord caught many American generals by surprise, including General Abrams, the new Army chief of staff (Abrams had stepped down as MACV commander on June 28 1972 to replace General Westmoreland as the Army chief of staff, and the U. S. Senate confirmed the appointment on October 12). He had felt that the United States would end up with some type of permanent ground and air commitment similar to that in South Korea. Instead, there was to be no residual support force, not even an advisory mission, and, in theory, the Viet Cong and Saigon governments were to settle their political differences at some later date.

The ceasefire began at 8 o'clock on Sunday, January 28 1973, and the war ground to a temporary halt. In the sixty days that followed, slightly over 58, 000 foreign troops departed South Vietnam, including about 23, 000 Americans, 25, 000 Koreans, and a few hundred assorted Thais, Filipinos, and Nationalist Chinese. Their leaving left about 550, 000 South Vietnamese regulars and another 525, 000 territorials to face a regular North Vietnamese army that Americans estimated at 500, 000 to 600, 000 troops, of which about 220, 000 were in South Vietnam and the rest close by. The final U. S. withdrawals were timed to match the release of American prisoners of war by the North Vietnam. MACV headquarters dissolved on March 29, and three new agencies took over its remaining functions. Thus ended the ill fated American involvement in Vietnam.

In late 1973, the cease fire was broken by the sending of 18 divisions from North Vietnam into the south. This, in time, would become one of the worst blood baths of the war. This continued through 1975, when the enemy came to be in near Saigon, and elements

of the underground political opposition came into the open and held meetings to voice their antigovernment feelings. The government moved in and on March 27 1975, arrested a number of people suspected of plotting a coup. On April 2 1975, the South Vietnamese Senate even adopted a resolution holding President Thieu personally responsible for the deteriorating situation and asking him to take immediate steps to form a broader cabinet. It was speculated that to save what they could, the government should send a plenipotentiary to Paris and ask the French government to act as official intermediary in negotiations to be conducted with the Communists. But President Thieu appeared only incredulous.

Demands that President Thieu should resign and transfer his powers at once to General Duong Van Minh were resurrected in earnest.

A coalition government led by General Minh, it was said, stood a better chance of being accepted by the Communists; if so, more bloodshed could be averted. On Monday April 21, during a meeting at Independence Palace, President Thieu announced his decision to step

down. He inferred that the United States wanted him to resign, and whether or not he consented, certain generals would press for a replacement. As required by the Constitution of South Vietnam, he was prepared to transfer the presidency to Vice President Tran Van Huong.

Finally, he asked the armed forces and the national police to fully support the new president. In the evening of April 21, 1975, the televised transfer of power ceremony took place at Independence Palace. After President Huong took over, he immediately went about imposing certain forceful measures, among which was a formal ban on all overseas travel. Servicemen and civil servants who had fled to foreign countries were ordered to return within thirty days; if they failed to do so, their citizenship would be revoked, and all their belongings confiscated. The only people that the new government would allow to go overseas were the old and the ill; they were to be permitted to seek treatment out of the country after posting a large bond (to say nothing of the large bribes required to obtain such a pass).

In the meantime, the military situation became increasingly bad.

In the afternoon of Sunday April 27 1975, the defence minister, Mr.

Tran Van Don, led a military delegation composed of general officers

of Joint General Staff and the commander of CMD in an appearance before

a meeting before both houses of Congress. By 7: 30 pm, 138 senators

and representatives were present. Mr. Don summarized the military

situation: Saigon was now surrounded by fifteen enemy divisions under

the control of three army corps. The Saigon – Vung Tau Highway had

been cut, and enemy troops were advancing toward the Long Binh base.

At 8: 20 pm, the General Assembly voted to hand over the presidency to

General Minh. The next day, Monday April 28, 1975 at 5: 30 pm, General

Minh was sworn in as president. President Minh was much more

confident. He based his conviction of an eventual political

arrangement with the Communists on these facts as he saw them: (1)

The Communists did not have a solid structure in Saigon – negotiations

would provide more time for solidation.(2)The provisional

government was strongly anti – Communist and the Communists preferred

a “ two Vietnams” solution.(3)It was believed that Communist China preferred a divided Vietnam and a unified Vietnam would pose a threat to China’s border. Finally, “ The Communists know that the people of South Vietnam don’t like Communism. Since it is impossible for the Communists to kill them all, it is to their advantage to negotiate.

So he firmly believed that a government with him at the head would be more acceptable to the Communists, and that they would be willing to negotiate with him for a political solution.

President Minh waited in vain for a favorable word from the other side, but none came. The response of the Communists was ominous: they bombed Tan Son Nhut Air base the moment he was sworn in, and shelled Saigon barely twelve hours later. Still a last ditch effort was attempted by President Minh’s people to contact the Communists through their representative at Tan Son Nhut. But the answer was evasive and intimidating. It was then that President Minh realised that all hope was gone. He gave twenty – four hours for all U. S. personnel to leave South Vietnam. The evacuation proceeded

feverishly throughout the night and was over at 5: 00 am on April 30.

At 10 : 00 am on April 30, 1975, President Minh ordered the armed forces to stop fighting, and gave in to all Communist demands. And the Republic of South Vietnam came under Communist control and no longer existed as a free nation.

Conclusions

The United States policy of Vietnamization was a good idea, but the time was not ripe for it to best be used. Saigon's military strength was rated by nearly all experts in South Vietnam as incapable of handling a combined threat. True, Vietnamization was not what led to the total withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, but the opinions pressed by Laird had somewhat of an affect on our agreeing to sign a ceasefire agreement. Also, if we had used Vietnamization's program of building up South Vietnam's armed forces more extensively, South Vietnam might still be in exiezce today.

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