

Table 4. Military Casualty Comparison

	Killed in Action, U.S.	Killed in Action, RVNAF	Wounded in Action, U.S.	Wounded in Action, RVNAF
1960	—	2,223	—	2,788
1961	11	4,004	2	5,449
1962	31	4,457	41	7,195
1963	78	5,665	218	11,488
1964	147	7,457	522	17,017
1965	1,369	11,242	3,308	23,118
1966	5,008	11,953	16,526	20,975
1967	9,377	12,716	32,370	29,448
1968	14,589	27,915	46,797	70,696
1969	9,414	21,833	32,940	65,276
1970	4,221	23,346	15,211	71,582
1971	1,381	22,738	4,767	60,939
1972	300	39,587	587	109,960
1973	237	27,901	24	131,936
1974	207	31,219	—	155,735
Total	46,370	254,256	153,313	783,602

Source: Jeffrey J. Clarke, *Advice and Support: The Final Years* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1988), 275.

RVNAF's qualified success during the 1968 Tet offensive. Although the Communists had surprised the Saigon command, the RVNAF had eventually recovered and, in concert with the U.S. forces in country, inflicted severe casualties on the Communist forces. The Communists' inability to cause a general uprising of the people against the Saigon government also encouraged Thieu. He and his field commanders came to believe that they could carry on the war in the absence of the Americans, but this tenuous confidence was based on the assumption that "the U.S. would continue to help financially, materially, technologically, and even spiritually, if not with manpower."⁵⁰ One former South Vietnamese general wrote after the war that his countrymen had believed all along that "U.S. forces would continue to stand behind the RVNAF with their support to fill in the gaps that the RVNAF were still unable or did not have enough time to do by themselves."⁵¹ Later, when it became apparent that the United States would no longer help the South Vietnamese, the reality deeply shook the confidence of President Thieu and his forces, contributing toward the panic that led to the final defeat.

3

The RVNAF in Action

THE COMBAT SITUATION—1969

When the United States began prosecuting Vietnamization in earnest, South Vietnamese troop strength expanded rapidly, new and more modern equipment was delivered, and the advisory effort improved. However, these upgrades were not conducted in a vacuum—the war continued unabated. Thus, the transition to South Vietnamese responsibility for the war, including aforementioned changes in force structure and extensive modernization and training efforts, took place while both the U.S. forces and the RVNAF continued to do battle with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in the field.

Even as the Nixon administration took office and began to develop what would become the Vietnamization strategy, the Communists demonstrated that they were not going to give the new American president and his advisers any breathing room. The North Vietnamese launched a country-wide offensive in February 1969. The primary targets for the new attacks were U.S. forces and installations; lines of communications and the pacification program served as secondary targets.¹ Although Communist forces attacked over 125 major targets and conducted smaller sapper raids and mortar attacks on 400 others, they failed to achieve the same stunning results that operational surprise had yielded in the initial stages of the 1968 Tet offensive. This time, better allied intelligence and the reduced strength of the Communist forces due to losses sustained in the previous year's offensive enabled the allies to deal very effectively with the new attacks. Nevertheless, a surge of allied casualties prompted Nixon to respond in March by ordering the secret bombing of Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.

The possibility of bombing the North Vietnamese buildup in Cambodia had been under discussion for some time.² However, Secretary of Defense Laird had opposed the option as a potential political nightmare for the administration and strongly urged the president to pursue Vietnamization and accelerate American

troop withdrawals. Always highly attuned to the domestic political situation, Laird opposed widening the war in any way and believed that the bombing of Cambodia would be counterproductive to the effort to disengage the United States from the war.³ Kissinger agreed, advising Nixon to give negotiations a chance.⁴ However, when Communist forces struck Saigon with a rocket attack in March, Nixon gave the green light for Operation Menu, the secret bombing of Cambodia. Over the next fifteen months, 3,630 secret B-52 raids were conducted against suspected Communist positions in Cambodia.⁵ Events would eventually prove the wisdom of Laird's counsel against any secret attempts to widen the war.

Despite potentially disastrous political consequences, the secret bombing had a positive impact in the long run in a purely military sense, for it reduced the availability of outside support to the Communist forces in South Vietnam.⁶ Realizing that time was at a premium as he put the finishing touches on the Vietnamization policy, Nixon hoped that the secret bombing would weaken the Communist forces in the South and provide more time for the new policy to work.

In the same vein, General Abrams, attempting to provide a protective screen for the Vietnamization effort, ordered U.S. forces to keep the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong off balance to prevent them from mounting any prolonged action that might interfere with the process of upgrading the RVNAF to assume greater responsibility for the war. Abrams broke his forces into small platoon- and company-sized task forces and ordered them to concentrate on extensive patrolling and night operations, a tactic he described as "getting into his [the enemy's] system."⁷

The emphasis on small unit operations, however, did not mean an end to large-scale battles involving U.S. troops. As President Nixon and his advisers made final preparations for announcing the initiation of Vietnamization at Midway, the 101st Airborne Division launched an assault into the A Shau Valley in an effort to clean out North Vietnamese Base Area 611, a major Communist logistical support area. The operation was a follow-on to Operation Dewey Canyon, conducted in the same area earlier in the year by elements of the 1st Marine Division. The paratroopers of the 101st ran into a large enemy force and a major battle ensued for Ap Bia Hill (Hill 939), which later became known as "Hamburger Hill." The action resulted in 56 Americans killed and 630 enemy dead.⁸ The battle, although a tactical success in keeping the NVA off balance, provoked a public outcry in the United States over heavy American casualties and the seemingly meaningless nature of a struggle that saw such a bloody expenditure of lives only to have U.S. forces abandon the battlefield shortly after the fighting ended. The American press gave wide coverage to Senator Edward Kennedy's comment that the battle was "senseless and irresponsible" and his charge that "President Nixon has told us, without question, that we seek no military victory, that we seek only peace. How can we justify sending our boys against a hill a dozen times, finally taking it, and then withdrawing a week later?"⁹ The *New York Times* said after the battle, "The public is certainly entitled to raise questions about the current aggressive posture of the United States military in South Vietnam."¹⁰ Many Americans perceived the battle of Hamburger Hill

as a symbol of the Nixon administration's failure to make any substantive changes to the American approach in South Vietnam, and the president came under severe criticism for a seeming lack of strategy.¹¹

In response to those growing increasingly weary of continued loss of U.S. lives for apparently meaningless real estate, Nixon and Laird prepared to announce plans to Vietnamize the war as a prelude to an orderly U.S. withdrawal. However, the administration needed time to institute the new policy, and Nixon, desirous of achieving "peace with honor," had to make sure that there were no more Hamburger Hills. Accordingly, he sent word to Abrams to take measures to hold down U.S. casualties.¹²

U.S. TROOP WITHDRAWALS

Shortly after American units battled with the enemy at Hamburger Hill and while fighting continued at many other hot spots around South Vietnam, President Nixon announced his Vietnamization policy and associated plans to reduce the number of American combat troops in Vietnam. Now Abrams had to wrestle with the prickly issue of how to prepare the South Vietnamese forces to take over even as he continued to prosecute the war in the field. Both of these demanding tasks had to be handled while President Nixon and Secretary Laird continued to push for greater and faster troop reductions.

As previously noted, discussions about U.S. troop withdrawals had begun shortly after President Nixon's inauguration.¹³ En route to Midway in June 1969 to announce the initiation of Vietnamization, members of the administration held a meeting in Honolulu to devise a withdrawal strategy. Attendees included Nixon, Kissinger, Laird, Secretary of State Rogers, Ambassadors Ellsworth Bunker and Henry Cabot Lodge, Gen. Earle Wheeler, and General Abrams. Kissinger recorded that the "military approached the subject [of troop withdrawal] with a heavy heart. . . it would make victory impossible and even an honorable outcome problematical."¹⁴ Prior to this meeting, General Abrams had questioned the size and pace of any contemplated withdrawals. According to Abrams biographer Lewis Sorley, the U.S. commander believed his troops were beginning to enjoy more success in combating the Communist forces and naturally wanted to retain them to press the advantage. However, Sorley maintains, Abrams "also had the sensitivity to understand the political realities in the United States and what they portended in terms of continued support for prosecution of the war."¹⁵ Therefore, once the decision was made to begin the troop withdrawals, Abrams gave it his wholehearted support, realizing that the U.S. commitment had to be downsized in order to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the U.S. commander still had concerns about the timing and wisdom of withdrawing troops when the enemy's strength appeared to be waning. In response, General Wheeler had assured Abrams on two separate occasions that any American redeployments would take into consideration the situation on the battlefield.¹⁷

Despite the concerns of the operational commander, the president decided to announce the first withdrawal increment at Midway and proceed with the disengagement of U.S. forces. Further reductions were to be based on three criteria: the level of enemy activity, progress in the Paris peace talks, and the strengthening of the RVNAF.¹⁸ Kissinger wrote: "Henceforth, we [the United States] would be in a race between the decline in our combat capabilities and the improvement of South Vietnamese forces—a race whose outcome was at best uncertain."¹⁹

Nevertheless, after Nixon announced the first U.S. troop withdrawal at Midway, he was "jubilant" and considered the announcement a "political triumph."²⁰ He thought it would accomplish several significant aims. First, he hoped the initial withdrawal would quiet the antiwar critics and buy the administration time to further develop its strategy; second, he thought it would send a signal to the North Vietnamese that the United States was serious about seeking peace in Southeast Asia. Nixon and his advisers would be proved wrong on all counts.

Former secretary of defense Clark Clifford gave Nixon and Laird new motivation to expand their U.S. troop withdrawal plans. In July 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.²¹ Nixon, never one to shrink from a challenge, stated at a press conference that he could improve upon Clifford's schedule.²² The president's statement received a great deal 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. The consequences for the peace negotiations and the eventual cease-fire agreement would be serious.

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 1st and 2nd brigades of the 9th Infantry Division departed the Mekong Delta. In the months following the Midway announcement, discussions continued about the size and pace of the U.S. withdrawal. Laird had formulated several options for the rest of 1969 that ranged from withdrawing a low of 50,000 troops to a high of 100,000; in between were various combinations of numbers and forces. 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.²³ Laird's warning proved timely. On 6 August, as soldiers from the 9th Infantry Division prepared to depart South Vietnam, the Communists attacked Cam Ranh Bay, followed five days later by additional attacks on 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"; thus, the Communists, believing they were in a position to dictate the degree and intensity of combat, launched the new round of attacks.²⁴

When Nixon had made his announcement in June about the initial U.S. troop

withdrawal, he emphasized that the level of enemy activity would be one of the criteria for further reductions. These new Communist attacks clearly went against Nixon's conditions; his subsequent announcement that he was delaying a decision about additional troop withdrawals caused an uproar in both 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."²⁵ 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."²⁶ Time would prove Kissinger to be right, but during the NSC meeting he was the only dissenter to the decision to proceed 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."²⁷

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 9th Infantry Division, the 3rd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division, the 1st Infantry Division, the 3rd Marine Division, two brigades of the 25th Infantry Division, and the entire 4th Infantry Division had been redeployed (table 5 depicts the schedule of U.S. troop unit withdrawals from South Vietnam). As these U.S. forces prepared to depart, they suspended combat operations and passed responsibility for their respective operational areas to the RVNAF.

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 543,400 to a residual force of 27,000 (see table 6).²⁸

ABRAMS PREPARES TO TURN OVER THE WAR

As Henry Kissinger pointed out, the U.S. troop withdrawals gathered a momentum of their own; any attempt by the president to modify the schedule, even when he may have been so inclined because of the battlefield situation in South Vietnam, provoked vigorous reaction by Congress, the media, and the antiwar element. Thus,

Table 5. Redeployment of Major U.S. Army Units from Vietnam

Unit	Redeployed	Main Area of Operations In Country
9th Infantry Division (2 brigades) 3rd Brigade	Aug. 1969 Sep. 1970	IV CTZ (Corps Tactical Zone)
3rd Brigade, Eighty-second Airborne Division	Dec. 1969	I CTZ
1st Infantry Division (3 brigades)	April 1970	III CTZ
199th Infantry Brigade	Oct. 1970	III CTZ
25th Infantry Division (3 brigades)	Nov. 1970	III CTZ
4th Infantry Division (2 brigades) 3rd Brigade	Dec. 1970 April 1970	II CTZ
1st Cavalry Division (3 brigades)	April 1971	I, II, and III CTZ
11th Armored Cavalry Regiment	April 1971	III CTZ
1st Brigade, Fifth Infantry Division	Sep. 1971	III CTZ
173rd Airborne Brigade	Sep. 1971	III and II CTZ
23rd Infantry Division (3 brigades)	Nov. 1971	I CTZ
101st Airborne Division	March 1972	I CTZ
1st Airborne Brigade	Jan. 1972	
2nd Airborne Brigade	Feb. 1972	
3rd Airborne Brigade	Dec. 1971	

Source: Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Indochina Monographs: Vietnamization and the Cease-Fire* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p. 23.

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. Such 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."²⁹

When Abrams assumed command of MACV from General Westmoreland in July 1968, he had fully realized 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, which 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, but with Nixon's announcement of his Vietnamization policy, the mission, as previously described, and focus of MACV changed drastically.

On 7 July 1969, the president met with Kissinger, Laird, Rogers, Wheeler, John Mitchell, and Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr. (a marine officer who was deputy director of the CIA) aboard the presidential yacht *Sequoia*.³⁰ The purpose of the meeting was to discuss an apparent lull in the fighting in South Vietnam. The number of enemy attacks in South Vietnam had diminished after the Hamburger Hill

Table 6. U.S. Troop Redeployments from Vietnam

	Dates	Forces Redeployed	Forces Remaining
1	July-Aug. 1969	25,000	519,000
2	Sep.-Dec. 1969	35,000	484,000
3	Jan.-Apr. 1970	50,000	434,000
4	July-Oct. 1970	50,000	384,000
5	Nov.-Dec. 1970	40,000	344,000
6	Jan.-Apr. 1971	60,000	284,000
7	May-June 1971	29,300	254,000
8	July-Aug. 1971	28,700	226,000
9	Sep.-Nov. 1971	42,000	184,000
10	Dec.-Jan. 1972	45,000	139,000
11	Feb.-Apr. 1972	70,000	69,000
12	May-June 1972	20,000	49,000
13	July-Sep. 1972	10,000	39,000
14	Oct.-Nov. 1972	12,000	27,000

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

battle, and U.S. casualties had reached their lowest level of the year. According to Kissinger, the discussion centered around determining why the level of fighting had dropped off—whether it was due to Hanoi's exhaustion, a new negotiating strategy, or an attempt by Hanoi to achieve de-escalation by tacit understanding?³¹ Kissinger later wrote, "It was symptomatic of the intellectual confusion of the period that in the relief felt when a military lull eased both casualties and domestic pressures, no one asked the question whether the lull might not reflect the fact that our strategy was succeeding and should therefore be continued."³² Instead, there was "unanimity" that the situation provided an excellent opportunity to reciprocate by de-escalating U.S. operations in South Vietnam; at the same time, MACV efforts could be brought into better accord with the Vietnamization effort. Nixon agreed and authorized Secretary of Defense Laird to issue new guidelines to General Abrams.

The result was a new mission statement for MACV that emphasized the desire of the United States "to assist the Republic of Vietnam Armed forces to take over an increasing share of combat operations."³³ The mission statement (which was to go into effect on 15 August 1969) charged Abrams and his command to 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.³⁴ Abrams was also told once again to hold down U.S. casualties. Henry Kissinger later reported that Nixon changed his mind about these orders and attempted to rescind them. However, Secretary Laird said the orders had already been sent, and they were allowed to stand.³⁵ If Kissinger's account is accurate and the president did try to rescind the orders, Nixon did not reveal why he had second thoughts about the official mission change for MACV. Perhaps he was worried about interfering in military matters, or perhaps he did not want to

signal the North Vietnamese that the United States was beginning to reduce the level of its commitment to the war. Nevertheless, the president let the orders stand and reiterated the new guidance in person when he made a surprise visit to Vietnam later in August. There, he stressed the shift in focus for U.S. forces, saying that "the primary mission of American troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam."³⁶ Notably, the president did not make this new guidance public until a nationally televised speech in November.

General Abrams, who had previously expressed misgivings about the accelerated U.S. troop withdrawals, understood his marching orders and stepped up measures to improve the combat capabilities of the South Vietnamese units.³⁷ The problem was not a new one for Abrams, who, since his assumption of command in 1968, had been concerned with what were essentially two different wars being fought by the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. Abrams had sought to end the division of roles and missions between American and South Vietnamese combat forces through the adoption of a single combined allied strategy, thus eliminating "the tacit existence of two separate strategies, attrition and pacification."³⁸ He described this approach 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."³⁹ The "one war" concept was formalized in the MACV Objectives Plan approved in March 1969.

Abrams and Ambassador Bunker convinced President Thieu that Abrams's approach was the right way to proceed and secured his agreement that the MACV Objectives Plan should serve as the basis of the allied forces' efforts in South Vietnam. The decision was made official when Abrams and Gen. Cao Van Vien, chief of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, signed the Combined Campaign 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."⁴⁰ The plan further established population security and support of pacification as the primary objectives of the American and South Vietnamese forces.

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. Abrams had already begun 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.

By the time that Abrams received his new orders, he had already initiated programs to expand RVNAF force structure and provide more modern weapons to the South Vietnamese, as discussed above. While these improvements were being made, Abrams turned his focus on increasing the combat capabilities of the

RVNAF in the field, in part by having South Vietnamese troops fight side by side with the American troops in combined field 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 ARVN as no more than "an additional burden" that had to be taken in tow, more "apt to cause problems . . . than be helpful."⁴¹ Although the 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 American and South Vietnamese forces. The hope was that American units would serve as models for Saigon's soldiers by more closely integrating the operations of the two national forces. Such integration 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.⁴² As the South Vietnamese forces became more capable on the battlefield, they could assume a greater share of the burden as U.S. combat forces were steadily drawn down. One former ARVN general described the approach, noting that

by participating in combat operations hand-in-hand with American units, Vietnamese forces—regular and territorial—would acquire valuable and practical experience which could hardly be acquired in a training center. Thus, combined and joint operations offered ARVN units not only the chance to observe American methods of operations, American use of firepower and mobility assets, and American leadership in action, but also offered the fringe benefits of additional combat support which could not otherwise be made available from Vietnamese resources. This was in fact a very special type of on-the-job or in-action training in which U.S. units performed the role of instructor by giving real life, positive examples of combat actions and counteractions in various tactical situations and types of terrain; and the ARVN units under their tutelage benefitted from observing and emulating the U.S. units.⁴³

Unfortunately, the initiative to integrate the South Vietnamese troops into the main battle effort would prove to be uneven, varying from corps tactical zone to corps tactical zone. Several possible reasons exist. Some senior U.S. commanders were wary of the South Vietnamese troops and Abrams's "one war" concept. However, General Davidson, who was Abrams's J-2 intelligence officer at MACV, took exception to those blaming this wariness for the shortcomings of the Vietnamization effort. He wrote: "It has become conventional wisdom to claim that the new concept suffered severely because Abrams's senior commanders refused to support it. This is nonsense. In many cases the general officers in Vietnam agreed with Abrams's strategy and carried it out with dedication. Even those who disagreed

with the concept dutifully, if unenthusiastically, gave it their full support. Abrams himself would accept no less, and he had the power of enforcement."⁴⁴ Davidson may have understated the resistance to the plan; it is not clear that all of Abrams's senior commanders thought that his new concept was a good idea, but there is also no doubt that Abrams had their careers in his hand and they had to get on board with his ideas or suffer the consequences. Still, some U.S. commanders were more aggressive than others in trying to make the new program work.

The South Vietnamese themselves proved to be another factor contributing to the disparate results of the new program. Leadership ability, fighting spirit, and tactical acumen varied throughout the South Vietnamese armed forces. Not all RVNAF units and commanders were prepared to keep their end of the bargain. Thus, the "one war" approach achieved more success in some areas than others.

"ONE WAR"

In I Corps, Lt. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, the U.S. XXIV Corps commander, worked very closely with the 1st ARVN division commander, Maj. Gen. (later Lt. Gen.) Ngo Quang Truong, integrating the South Vietnamese units into operational plans as full partners.⁴⁵ Under what was essentially a U.S.-ARVN combined command, the South Vietnamese forces operated closely with the U.S. 3rd Marine Division, the 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), and the 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. After Stilwell was replaced by Maj. Gen. Melvin Zais later in 1969, the new commander continued Stilwell's emphasis on combined operations, and other U.S. forces in I Corps stepped up their cooperative efforts with ARVN. In the southern half of the zone, the U.S. 23rd Infantry Division routinely conducted combined operations with 2nd Infantry Division (ARVN) in Quang Tin and Quang Ngai provinces. The U.S. 1st Marine Division, defending the Da Nang area, conducted combined operations with the South Vietnamese Quang Da Special Zone forces and the 51st ARVN Infantry Regiment. Abrams was extremely pleased with the performance of the ARVN forces in I Corps; later in 1969, he ordered the U.S. 1st 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 located there.

In II Corps Tactical Zone, U.S. commanders also pursued combined operations, but with less success. Prior to late 1968 and early 1969, cooperation between the U.S. and ARVN forces in II Corps had been largely ineffective. The U.S. forces concerned themselves with enemy mainforce units in outlying areas of the Central Highlands, while the ARVN forces limited their activities to pacification support in the lowland coastal areas and population centers. With the institution of the "one war" concept by General Abrams, Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, commander of I Field Force, and his counterpart, Lt. Gen. Lu Lan, commander of ARVN II Corps, agreed

that it was time to devise a means of exploiting the advantages of each national force while minimizing their respective disadvantages.⁴⁶ They 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 of unit each force could commit, and coordination and cooperation were effected from corps to battalion and districts. The "Pair Off" program was seen as a means of upgrading ARVN combat effectiveness and preparing ARVN units in II Corps for a larger share of the combat burden.⁴⁷ As such, this concept was later expanded to include Vietnamese artillery and other combat support units. Under this program, the U.S. 4th Infantry Division and the U.S. 173rd Airborne Brigade joined forces with the ARVN 22nd and 23rd infantry divisions.

Peers and Lan ordered the U.S. 4th Infantry Division and two ARVN regiments to hold the Communist forces at bay along the border while they concentrated the efforts of the remaining U.S. and ARVN units on restoring and expanding Saigon's control of the coastal population, including traditionally contested Binh Dinh and Phu Yen provinces. After 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, making 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. Despite early gains in improving the confidence and capabilities of ARVN units in II Corps, the "Pair Off" program was abandoned in late 1969.

In the IV Corps Tactical Zone (Mekong Delta), the main U.S. presence was the 9th Infantry Division, which had arrived in country in 1967. Prior to 1969, the U.S. division seldom worked with the three ARVN divisions in the region or the territorial units. Moreover, Maj. Gen. Julian J. Ewell, the 9th Infantry Division commander, believed that the South Vietnamese forces in the Delta were ineffective and warned that the South Vietnamese were not ready to take control of the U.S. division's area of operations.⁴⁸ Therefore, many were surprised by the selection of the 9th as the first American division to be redeployed to the United States after the Midway announcement. As Jeffrey Clarke points out, the decision was, at the very least, partly a political move designed to gain support for the Nixon administration's Vietnamization policy by fulfilling the promise to bring home combat troops rather than just support personnel.⁴⁹ Despite Ewell's warnings about South Vietnamese military capabilities in the Delta, the withdrawal of the 9th also made sense strategically. By 1969, the enemy situation in the Delta was fairly stable, since the area's Viet Cong forces had been severely weakened during the 1968 Tet offensive. Additionally, the Delta was at the far end of the North Vietnamese supply route and could not be reinforced easily. Should trouble arise, General

Abrams could shift U.S. forces to the area from the nearby III Corps zone.⁵⁰ Thus, withdrawing the 9th Division was only moderately risky from a military viewpoint; politically, the move demonstrated Nixon's willingness to pull out combat troops. In this instance, sound military logic coincided with political expediency. The same would not always hold true for further troop reductions.

The American withdrawal from the Delta was rapid. U.S. forces began standing down from combat operations in June 1969, and the division had departed by the end of August (although one of the three brigades remained in Vietnam and was moved to III Corps Tactical Zone). U.S. Army public affairs was instructed to stress both the accomplishments of the departing American troops and the ability of South Vietnamese forces to carry on without them.⁵¹ Despite this guidance, the truth of the situation was something else again. The former 9th Infantry Division area of operations was left to the South Vietnamese 7th Infantry Division. As General Ewell had pointed out, the 7th ARVN was not prepared to assume responsibility for the area for a number of reasons, not the least of which was senior officer leadership. The division was beset by problems, but fortunately for both Washington and Saigon, enemy activity in the Delta remained low during late 1969 and 1970; thus, the 7th Division's ineffectiveness led to no immediate repercussions.

In III Corps Tactical Zone, the U.S. II Field Force commander, Lt. Gen. Julian Ewell (who had been promoted and given command of II Field Force in Long Binh upon the departure of the 9th Infantry Division), and his counterpart, Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, commander of ARVN III Corps, faced difficult circumstances. The III CTZ included the eleven provinces that surrounded Saigon. The area, bordered on the west by Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, included several of the main historical invasion routes into the heart of the country. The combined North Vietnamese-Viet Cong threat was still too strong in 1969 for the South Vietnamese forces in III Corps, who were not considered to be among the best units in the RVNAF. Additionally, the ARVN troops in the area had traditionally been tied to area security missions, rather than aggressive searches for the enemy. General Ewell was told in April 1969 that he would receive no further U.S. resources and that he was to get the South Vietnamese divisions moving "despite their commanders."⁵² Impressed with the successes of U.S.-RVNAF combined operations in I Corps, General Ewell decided to institute a similar program of his own. He believed that the key to victory in Vietnam was the successful application of combat power, such as artillery, army aviation, and other elements of combat and combat service support. He knew from his experience as a division commander in the Delta that the South Vietnamese had difficulties coordinating the little support they did have. Ewell planned to correct these shortcomings by marrying each major Vietnamese unit in III Corps with a similar American force that would furnish the necessary aviation, artillery, and communications support needed to make the South Vietnamese units viable forces on the battlefield and, at the same time, teach them how to better employ the weapons of war. His counterpart, Lieutenant General Tri, fully agreed with Ewell's concept, admitting that "the major problem of II FFV is

the improvement of the three ARVN divisions," and together he and Ewell set about to establish a "buddy system" that would "superimpose" one major U.S. unit on each of Tri's divisions.⁵³

The result was a program called "Dong Tien" (Progress Together). The three major goals of the program were (1) increasing the quantity and quality of combined and coordinated joint operations; (2) materially advancing the three major ARVN missions of pacification support, improvement of combat effectiveness, and intensification of combat operations; and (3) significantly increasing the efficient use of critical combat and combat support elements, particularly army aviation assets.⁵⁴ ARVN III Corps and U.S. II Field Force units would be closely associated on a continuing basis. 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. "Dong Tien" paired the 1st and 25th U.S. infantry divisions and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade with the ARVN 5th, 25th, and 18th infantry divisions, respectively. On the border areas, the 1st U.S. Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was paired with the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade.

According to a postwar study by ARVN lieutenant general Ngo Quang Truong, the "Dong Tien" program greatly improved the effectiveness of ARVN units throughout III Corps, and they began to show more aggressiveness, better coordination, and more sustained combat effort.⁵⁵ For example, the 1st U.S. and 5th 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 5th 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 fraught with difficulties and were of varying success, in most cases they were instrumental in increasing the battlefield proficiency of the RVNAF units. According to former South Vietnamese general Dong Van Khuyen, they helped pave the way for the South Vietnamese commanders and troops to assume new responsibilities as more U.S. forces began to withdraw.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, 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. As one former South Vietnamese general wrote after the war, "[U]nless a commander or leader had professional competence, devotion, and moral rectitude, he certainly could not expect his subordinates to be dedicated and aggressive. . . . There was finally the will and determination to fight, which again depended on motivation and leadership, and without which there was no sense in upgrading mere physical capabilities."⁵⁷ 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.

Despite continuing difficulties and concerns, Vietnamization had made progress in several areas by the end of 1969. Because of the modernization effort, all ARVN units had been equipped with M-16 rifles, which replaced the older, heavier M-1s, and had received M-79 grenade launchers and M-60 machine guns. The redeployment of U.S. troops had forced the RVNAF to assume more responsibility for the war, as the number of battalion-sized 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 51st ARVN Infantry Battalion, did very well against their Communist opponents, while others, like the 22nd ARVN Infantry Division, were largely ineffective in the field (the 22nd had conducted 1,800 ambushes during the summer months of 1969 and netted only six enemy killed).⁵⁸

The MACV Office of Information publicized the increased participation of the RVNAF, emphasizing that in time the South Vietnamese forces would be able to stand on their own.⁵⁹ 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 Americans withdrew.⁶⁰ 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.

PACIFICATION

While the South Vietnamese regular forces struggled to assume more responsibility for the fight against the Communists in the field, the pacification effort, a companion piece of Nixon's Vietnamization policy, continued in the battle for the "hearts and minds" of the South Vietnamese people. The emphasis on pacification had actually preceded the initiation of the Vietnamization program. Early groundwork for this effort had been laid in 1967 with the development of the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program headed by Robert W. Komer.⁶¹ The program had traditionally taken a back seat to the "bigger" war in the field between the U.S. combat units and the forces of the NVA and VC. The shock of the 1968 Communist Tet offensive highlighted the need to increase the emphasis on, and assets applied to, pacification of the countryside. Komer's successor, William E. Colby, later wrote that the United States "had finally discovered that the main element of the war was the war at the village, rather than the war between battalions."⁶²

During the 1968 Communist offensive, all the forces that had been committed to the pacification program had to be redeployed for the defense of provincial capitals and district towns. Once the enemy offensive ran its course, the Saigon government turned its attention once again to securing the rural areas. Consequently, a special three-month "Accelerated Pacification Campaign" was launched in November 1968 to "make coordinated and concerted use of all military, governmental, and police resources to bring about maximum security for the rural areas."⁶³ Because the brief campaign was successful by most measurements, the Saigon government and U.S. officials instituted the 1969 Pacification and Development Plan to take advantage of the advances made during the previous effort.

According to General Abrams, the key to pacification was "to provide meaningful, continuing security for the Vietnamese people."⁶⁴ The new pacification plan, or the Special Campaign as it was referred to by the South Vietnamese, called first for the expansion of secure areas; the second stage called for the government of South Vietnam to take measures to develop the rural areas, maintain law and order, and build the local economies.⁶⁵ Thus, security became the initial focus of the pacification effort; without a secure environment, all other programs were doomed to failure.

Two instrumental factors set the stage for further success by Saigon in the pacification effort, particularly in regard to improving the rural security situation. First, the Communist forces, still suffering from the effects of the 1968 battles, lacked sufficient strength to contest the new efforts by the Saigon government in the rural areas, at least during the latter half of 1969.⁶⁶ The temporary weakness greatly enhanced Saigon's opportunity to make gains. Second, the People's Self-Defense Force (PSDF) had increased in strength and popularity. Organized prior to 1968 to provide a structure for local self-defense, the force had languished from lack of participation at the hamlet and village level. Somewhat ironically, the PSDF received a significant boost from the Tet offensive. Many South Vietnamese villagers, who heretofore had been at best ambivalent about joining Saigon's fight against the Communists, were shocked by what they saw as the excesses of the Communists during the 1968 attacks and joined the PSDF, taking up arms to protect their towns, villages, and hamlets. By the end of 1969, over three million members had volunteered for the PSDF. Thus, as former ARVN general Nguyen Duy Hinh asserts, the PSDF movement succeeded in rallying the popular masses to support Saigon's pacification effort and contributed greatly to the maintenance of local security.⁶⁷

As security increased, the villagers who had fled their homes to escape the fighting began to return. As they did, the populated and secure areas controlled by Saigon began to expand rapidly. By 1971, approximately 2 million refugees either returned to their home villages or were resettled elsewhere with government assistance; this number included 200,000 Vietnamese who had fled Cambodia.⁶⁸

Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker wrote President Nixon that the pacification program had flourished in 1969 because President Thieu, for the first time, took a

personal interest in it.⁶⁹ There is every indication that Bunker's assessment was correct. Thieu presided over the Central Pacification and Development Council, the agency charged with coordinating pacification activities, and had a personal hand in the development of the objectives for the Special Campaign.⁷⁰ Under his direction, the program focused on the village. In an attempt to return the villages to their own local control, the Thieu government allowed the villagers to choose their own village council, which in turn elected the village chief. In April 1969, Thieu gave the councils control over their own local security forces, and, in an unprecedented move, the village councils received control over village development funds. Thieu also established a special training center for village officials, and eventually some 17,000 leaders passed through the school.⁷¹

Due to the strides made in securing the countryside and the momentum supplied by President Thieu, the pacification program made great advances in 1969. By the end of the year, 90 percent of the villages and hamlets of South Vietnam were rated as secure or relatively secure; five million more people lived in government-controlled secure areas than in 1967; and 92 percent of the population lived in secure or relatively secure areas.⁷² While these numbers, like many statistics used during the Vietnam War, may be suspect, captured Communist documents attested to the success of the pacification program in 1969. Late that year, the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN, the senior Communist headquarters located near the Cambodian border northwest of Saigon) reported, "In sum, the Autumn campaign has not met planned results . . . [T]he enemy . . . has nevertheless fulfilled his most pressing requirements, particularly those of his rural pacification program. . . ."⁷³

The success in the pacification program greatly enhanced the overall Vietnamization process. Secure local areas meant that regular ARVN troops could be released to do battle with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong mainforce units. Other important effects included, in particular, increased popular morale, more secure road networks, and heightened identification of the rural population with the Thieu government in Saigon.

NIXON, U.S. PEACE OVERTURES, AND THE HOME FRONT

While General Abrams gradually turned over the war to the South Vietnamese and allied efforts intensified in the pacification arena, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger attempted to devise a negotiated end to the war. Although far removed from the battlefields in South Vietnam, the action of the two men, coupled with the North Vietnamese reaction and subsequent events on the American domestic front, significantly affected Vietnamization and U.S. policy in Indochina. Even before the Midway announcement in June, Nixon had been making overtures to the North Vietnamese. On 14 May 1969, in a televised speech, the president offered an eight-point peace plan under which all foreign troops, both American and North Viet-

namese, would withdraw from South Vietnam within one year of a signed agreement; an international body would monitor the withdrawals and supervise free elections in South Vietnam. Nixon warned the North Vietnamese not to confuse willingness to talk as weakness, saying, "Reports from Hanoi indicate that the enemy has given up hope for a military victory in South Vietnam, but is counting on a collapse of will in the United States. There could be no greater error in judgement."⁷⁴ Hanoi made no response. According to Henry Kissinger, the North Vietnamese refused to discuss the president's proposals.⁷⁵

In June, returning to Washington after the Midway conference, Nixon told a welcoming party gathered on the South Lawn of the White House that the 14 May peace plan and the Midway troop withdrawal announcement had left the door to peace wide open, saying, "And now we invite the leaders of North Vietnam to walk with us through that door."⁷⁶ Kissinger aide Alexander M. Haig recorded that Nixon hoped that Hanoi (and the antiwar element in the United States) would see his actions as a sign of his "flexibility."⁷⁷

On 15 July 1969, Nixon sent Ho Chi Minh a letter. The time had come, he wrote, "to move forward . . . toward an early resolution of this tragic war," and he promised to be "forthcoming and open-minded" in negotiations. Although the president did not offer any specific concessions or proposals, he alluded to the offer that he had made in his 14 May speech, concluding, "Let history record that at this critical juncture, both sides turned their face toward peace rather than toward conflict and war."⁷⁸ The letter was to be delivered by French businessman and intermediary Jean Sainteny. Nixon told him to impress upon Ho Chi Minh that the U.S. president was serious about peace, but he also instructed Sainteny to warn the North Vietnamese that if there was no breakthrough in the peace negotiations by 1 November, the anniversary of the preelection 1968 bombing halt, the president would feel obliged to resort to "measures of great consequence and force."⁷⁹ In the process of making a peace overture, Nixon had essentially issued an ultimatum to Hanoi.

While the North Vietnamese considered Nixon's letter, Nixon came to the conclusion that he had to do something to break the deadlock and back up his ultimatum. Historian George Herring maintains that Nixon was fearful that rising domestic protest might doom his efforts to pressure the North Vietnamese into a settlement.⁸⁰ Regardless of his innermost motivations, Nixon later wrote that he had decided to "'go for broke' in the sense that I would attempt to end the war one way or the other—either by negotiated agreement or by increased use of force."⁸¹ Accordingly, Kissinger instructed his staff to complete a new war plan "designed for maximum impact on the enemy's military capability."⁸² The result was a plan devised by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, code-named Duck Hook, which called for a massive four-day bombing campaign of Hanoi, Haiphong, and other key areas in North Vietnam, as well as the mining of harbors and rivers and the destruction of the Red River dike system to bring on extensive flooding. If Hanoi continued to avoid serious negotiations, Duck Hook would begin on 1 November 1969.

While the bombing campaign planning was underway, the North Vietnamese agreed to secret talks in Paris between their representatives, Xuan Thuy and Mai Van Bo, and Kissinger. Nixon told Kissinger to be firm with the North Vietnamese. He was to remind the Communists that U.S. troop withdrawals had begun and that the United States was prepared to accept the result of free elections. If Hanoi was not prepared to reciprocate, Kissinger was to reiterate the previously issued ultimatum and tell them "that if by November 1 no major progress has been made toward a solution, we will be compelled—with great reluctance—to take measures of the greatest consequences."⁸³ The secret negotiations began on 4 August 1969. Kissinger made no headway with Xuan Thuy, who demanded the complete withdrawal of all American forces from South Vietnam, the removal of President Thieu, and the establishment of a coalition government composed of the Communist Provisional Revolutionary Government and the remnants of the Saigon administration. As Kissinger wrote later, he and Xuan Thuy "had achieved little except to restate established positions."⁸⁴

The North Vietnamese provided a harsher response to Nixon's peace overtures on 6 August, when, as previously described, the Communist forces attacked more than one hundred villages, towns, and cities in South Vietnam. Kissinger later wrote, "The most generous interpretation [of the new attacks] could not avoid the conclusion that Hanoi did not believe in gestures, negotiation, goodwill, or reciprocity."⁸⁵ On 23 August, Nixon announced that he was delaying the decision on additional troop withdrawals.

On 25 August, Ho's reply to the president's July letter arrived. It was, in Nixon's words, a "cold rebuff."⁸⁶ Ho wrote that "the United States must cease the war of aggression and withdraw their troops from South Vietnam, respect the right of the population of the South and of the Vietnamese nation to dispose of themselves, without foreign influence."⁸⁷ Hanoi's answer was unequivocal; as Kissinger wrote, the "North Vietnamese were less interested in stopping the fighting than in winning it."⁸⁸ It appeared that any attempt to achieve a negotiated settlement would be immediately rejected.

However, the situation became more uncertain on 4 September when Ho Chi Minh died. What this meant for the war was unclear. Many in Congress and the media urged Nixon to declare a cease-fire, but he was not prepared to go that far. Instead, he suspended military operations for the day of Ho's funeral, an act that prompted more speculation about an armistice.

While trying to ascertain what Ho's death meant for his peace initiatives, Nixon also had to deal with an increasingly volatile domestic situation. The antiwar protesters had been quieted somewhat by the Midway announcement and subsequent withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Division from the Mekong Delta. However, Laird warned Nixon in early September, "I believe this may be an illusory phenomenon. The actual and potential antipathy for the war is, in my judgement, significant and increasing."⁸⁹ Laird was proven to be correct. The death of Ho Chi Minh and the possibility of an armistice gave those who wanted the United States

to get out of Vietnam renewed vigor. Antiwar sentiment grew in the press, in Congress, and on the streets of America. Congressmen rushed to introduce resolutions designed to disengage the United States from Vietnam, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee called a new round of hearings on the war. Antiwar activists called for a "Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam" to express a broad protest against the war on 15 October, 15 November, and so on until America was out of Vietnam.

In an attempt to undercut the effects of the Moratorium and to send a signal to the new leadership in Hanoi, Nixon announced on 16 September that he was withdrawing another sixty thousand troops from Vietnam by 15 December. He pointed out that this additional withdrawal was a significant step and that "the time for meaningful negotiations has therefore arrived."⁹⁰ Three days later, he said that because of the withdrawal, draft calls for November and December would be canceled, and on 1 December the first draft lottery would be held.⁹¹ By these actions, Nixon was trying to send a message to both the North Vietnamese and the antiwar movement.

Nixon found himself in a very difficult position. He knew he could not simply withdraw all U.S. troops without abrogating the American commitment to South Vietnam and risking its loss to the Communists. Thus, he had to continue to fight the war in the field, while at the same time trying to win a favorable settlement at the peace talks. Concurrently, he had to bolster public support for the war at home until he could achieve the negotiated settlement. However, as Nixon biographer Stephen Ambrose points out, "The war had always been a hard sell; once Nixon began to withdraw, it was nearly an impossible one."⁹² Maintaining support for the war effort proved a difficult challenge, particularly given Nixon's antipathy for dissidents. Nixon knew he had to get U.S. troops out of Vietnam, but he was not prepared to show any weakness or even give the appearance that he was kowtowing to the antiwar protesters.

On 26 September, Nixon reignited the fury of the dissenters at a press conference. When asked his view of the Moratorium, he replied, "As far as that kind of activity is concerned, we expect it. However, under no circumstances will I be affected whatever by it."⁹³ Despite his denials that the protesters had any influence on his decision making, it appears that they had an effect the dissenters did not anticipate: the more vocal and violent the protests, the more bellicose Nixon's attitude.

On 30 September, in a meeting with Republican congressional leaders, the president made a veiled reference to Duck Hook and his ultimatum to the North Vietnamese. He said the next sixty days would be crucial and further stated, "I can't tell you everything that will be going on, because if there is to be any chance of success, it will have to be done in secret. All I can tell you is this: I am doing my damndest to end the war . . . I won't make it hard for the North Vietnamese if they genuinely want a settlement, but I will not be the first President of the United States to lose a war."⁹⁴ In a meeting with nine Republican senators, he let out the Duck Hook secret, admitting that a blockade of Haiphong and invasion of North Vietnam

were under consideration. The next day, the story appeared in a Rowland Evans and Robert Novak newspaper column; Nixon had leaked the story himself to get the attention of the new North Vietnamese leadership in Hanoi.⁹⁵

Secretary of Defense Laird and Secretary of State Rogers were shocked by the column and urged the president not to implement the plan. They pointed out the very low casualty rates over the previous few months and noted the improved performance of the South Vietnamese as a result of the stepped-up Vietnamization program.⁹⁶ They pleaded with Nixon not to escalate the war. Undeterred, Nixon responded by sending a memo to Kissinger, saying, "It would be very helpful if a propaganda offensive could be launched, constantly repeating what we have done in offering peace in Vietnam in preparation for what we may have to do later."⁹⁷ Nixon was preparing to increase the stakes if the call for a negotiated settlement did not work.

Nixon's actions had predictable effects on the antiwar dissidents both in and out of the government. Senator William Fulbright announced new hearings on the war and said that Nixon had been in office for nine months, but had not made any "progress in delivering on his campaign promises to give birth to his plans to end the war."⁹⁸ Other congressmen, such as Senators John Sherman Cooper, Gaylord Nelson, Mike Mansfield, Edward Kennedy, and Eugene McCarthy also severely criticized Nixon and his policies, as did the public. The presidents of seventy-nine colleges signed a letter to Nixon urging him to step up the troop withdrawals. Angry protests were held at Berkeley, Penn, Cornell, Duke, and on many other campuses around the country, and picketers carried signs in front of the White House denouncing Nixon and the war.

Nixon provided an answer to the protesters in his public response to a letter he had received from Randy Dicks, a Georgetown University student who questioned the president's refusal to be swayed by the Moratorium's appeal to conscience and urged him to "take note of the will of the people." Nixon replied that there was little to be learned from the student demonstrations and further wrote: "Whatever the issue, to allow government policy to be made in the streets would destroy the democratic process. . . . [by giving] the decision, not to the majority, . . . but to those with the loudest voices. Others can say of Vietnam, 'Get out now;' when asked how, they can give the simple, flip answer: 'By sea.' They can ignore the consequences. . . . [but] history would rightly condemn a President who took such a course."⁹⁹

On 15 October, the Moratorium occurred as scheduled. Thousands of protesters marched in cities across the country, including Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Over 100,000 people in Boston, 200,000 in New York City, and more than 250,000 in Washington participated. Some of Nixon's advisers were disturbed that the Moratorium brought out the middle class and the middle-aged in great numbers, but the president put out the word that he was unmoved by the demonstrations and had spent the afternoon watching a football game on television. Privately, Nixon claimed that the protests "destroyed whatever small possibility may have still existed of ending the war in 1969."¹⁰⁰

That evening, Nixon began working on a major speech to be delivered on 3 November. Nixon perceived that he had two options regarding South Vietnam: he could accede to the protesters' demands and accelerate the U.S. troop withdrawals unilaterally; or he could escalate the war in an attempt to force the North Vietnamese to meaningful negotiated peace. While drafting his speech, the president received a great deal of advice. On 17 October, Kissinger, who had been strongly affected by the strength of the Moratorium, urged the president not to escalate until the North Vietnamese had a chance to respond to the 1 November deadline.¹⁰¹ That same day, Nixon met with the British guerrilla-warfare expert Sir Robert Thompson.¹⁰² The president asked Thompson what he thought about a potential U.S. escalation. Thompson was "clearly not in favor of escalation" because of the furor it would cause around the world; he further replied that he thought Vietnamization was the proper course of action. He realized that this approach meant a continuation of U.S. involvement in South Vietnam beyond Nixon's proclaimed target date of the end of 1970, but believed that it was critical for the United States "to see it through."¹⁰³

Nixon later indicated that in crafting his decision about escalation and the 1 November deadline he considered three factors: the rapidly declining American casualty figures (and the subsequent hue and cry that would be raised if he decided to escalate the war, causing the casualties to increase); the death of Ho Chi Minh and any new possibilities that might arise from the new leadership in Hanoi; and the advice that he received from Sir Robert Thompson.¹⁰⁴ He wrote, "In view of these three factors, and recognizing that the Moratorium had undercut the credibility of the ultimatum, I began to think more in terms of stepping up Vietnamization while continuing the fighting at its present level rather than trying to increase it. In many respects Vietnamization would be far more damaging to the Communists than an escalation that, as Thompson had pointed out, would not solve the basic problem of South Vietnamese preparedness, and that would stir up serious domestic problems in America."¹⁰⁵

Nixon continued to receive more advice as the 3 November speech grew closer. Secretary of State Rogers urged the president to concentrate on peace, emphasizing the Paris talks. Kissinger advised him to take a hard line, stressing the prospects of Vietnamization. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield sent him a memorandum that urged the president to consider the impact of the war on the home front, writing, "The continuance of the war in Vietnam, in my judgment, endangers the future of this nation. . . . Most serious are the deep divisions within our society to which this conflict of dubious origins and purpose is contributing."¹⁰⁶

Armed with all this advice, Nixon flew to Camp David on 24 October for a long weekend. There he worked twelve to fourteen hours a day writing and rewriting sections of the speech. Upon his return to Washington, he continued to work on the address, going through twelve drafts in the process. While the president honed his speech, speculation about what he would say became widespread. Many believed that he would announce new troop withdrawals, and some even hoped he would announce a unilateral cease-fire.

On Monday night, 3 November 1969, President Richard Nixon appeared on national television and radio to explain the administration's position. Nixon's message was that the United States was "going to keep our commitment in Vietnam." The United States would continue fighting until either the Communists agreed to negotiate a fair and honorable peace or the South Vietnamese were able to defend themselves on their own—whichever came first. The pace of American troop withdrawals would be based on the principles of the Nixon Doctrine and be linked to the progress of Vietnamization, the level of enemy activity, and developments on the negotiating front.

Saying that the obstacle to peace was not the president of the United States or South Vietnam, he pointed out that efforts had been made to negotiate with the North Vietnamese. However, the "other side" had refused to show "the least willingness to join us in seeking a just peace." He predicted that Hanoi would not cooperate "while it is convinced that all it has to do is wait for our next concession, and our next concession after that one, until it gets everything it wants."

Thus, unable to foresee any gains in the negotiating arena, the president emphasized the progress that was being made in Vietnamizing the war. He explained that he had changed General Abrams's orders, had reduced bombing operations by 20 percent, and had withdrawn sixty thousand men, while greatly improving ARVN's equipment and training. Consequently, infiltration was down, as were American casualties. Despite this success, he warned that the pace of future U.S. withdrawals would be tied to the level of enemy infiltration; and that if enemy activity and U.S. casualties increased, "I shall not hesitate to take strong and effective measures. . . . This is not a threat. This is a statement of policy."

Having laid out his plan, the president then asked for the support of the American people, saying:

And so tonight—to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support. I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate at Paris. Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.¹⁰⁷

Nixon was extremely pleased with the speech and wrote in his *Memoirs* that "very few speeches actually influence the course of history."¹⁰⁸ This was hyperbole at its best, for the president had announced no startling revelations and had merely said that he was going to keep on doing what he had been doing for the previous nine months. Public response to the speech was mixed. The media, for the most part, was not kind to the president. Representative of the print media response

was James Reston of the *New York Times*, who wrote, "It was a speech that seemed to be designed not to persuade the opposition, but to overwhelm it, and the chances are that this will merely divide and polarize the debaters in the United States, without bringing the enemy into serious negotiations."¹⁰⁹ The electronic media was no less critical. Bill Lawrence, ABC Television's national affairs editor, observed that the president's speech was "nothing new" politically and appealed, he said, to those who were moved by words rather than deeds; he concluded that the speech would make little difference to voters six months in the future.¹¹⁰

The American public responded more favorably. If Nixon intended to solidify his support, he did so with the "silent majority" remark, which apparently struck a chord. A Gallup telephone poll taken immediately after the speech showed 77 percent approval, and more than fifty thousand overwhelmingly supportive telegrams and thirty thousand letters of a similar nature poured into the White House.¹¹¹ This flood of public backing for the president's policies also had an impact on Congress. By November 12, 300 members of the House of Representatives—119 Democrats and 181 Republicans—had cosponsored a resolution of support for Nixon's Vietnam policies, and 58 senators—21 Democrats and 37 Republicans—had signed letters expressing similar sentiments.¹¹² Nixon concluded that he had the public support he needed to continue his policy of waging war in Vietnam while negotiating for peace in Paris until the war could be brought to "an honorable and successful conclusion."¹¹³ However, Nixon was under no illusion that this momentary outpouring of support would last and realized that "under the constant pounding from the media and our critics in Congress, people would soon be demanding that new actions be taken to produce progress and end the war."¹¹⁴

Nixon's 3 November speech had made no concessions to the protesters, and the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam responded with a call for a two-day protest. These demonstrations far surpassed even the expectations of those who had planned them. The events began on 13 November with a dramatic "March against Death," in which a single file of 40,000 people walked in silence from Arlington National Cemetery to the White House and Capitol. The protest reached its climax on 15 March when between 250,000 and 300,000 participants marched from the Capitol down Pennsylvania Avenue to the Washington Monument; many marchers carried placards reading "Silent Majority for Peace." The demonstrations of the November Moratorium were extremely peaceful in nature and, with the October Moratorium, demonstrated the growing strength of the anti-war movement and the increasing involvement of mainstream Americans.

The Nixon administration ended 1969 confronted by stalemate on virtually every front with respect to the war in Vietnam—on the battlefield, at the negotiating table, and on the American home front. Short of a complete unilateral withdrawal, the only way to break these impasses was to make Vietnamization work. Vietnamization and its companion program, pacification, were beginning to show glimmers of success; however, the pace of change was extremely slow. Nixon had been running the war for a year, and over 475,000 U.S. troops still remained in

Southeast Asia and another 9,145 had been killed. Still, a Gallup poll reported that by November, only one out of five Americans supported an immediate withdrawal from South Vietnam.¹¹⁵ The key question was how rapidly that percentage would shift—would the American people give Nixon and his administration the time needed to complete the process of Vietnamization? Another critical question was whether the policy itself was a practical solution, given South Vietnam's political leadership and the many problems that plagued both the military and South Vietnamese society at large.

4

Raising the Stakes

"TALKING AND FIGHTING"

In 1969, the North Vietnamese modified their strategy in the South. Documents captured later in the war revealed that the Communists had concluded after the 1968 Tet offensive that launching a general offensive had been too costly. In April 1969, the North Vietnamese leadership in the South announced to their troops in Directive 53: "Never again and under no circumstances are we to risk our entire military force for just an offensive. On the contrary, we should endeavor to preserve our military potential for future campaigns."¹ In July, the Communist high command issued Resolutions 9 and 14, which closely examined the mistakes and shortcomings of the Tet offensive and called for a more economical means of continuing the fight. Resolution 9 was a critical self-analysis, noting both the failure of the 1968 "General Offensive-General Uprising" in achieving its overall objectives and the ineffectiveness of Communist proselytizing activities during the campaign.² Resolution 14 called for a de-emphasis of mainforce warfare and a return to small-scale actions by local force guerrillas, stating: "We secure victory not through a one-blow offensive, and not through a phase of attack, not even through a series of attacks culminating in a final kill. . . . Victory will come to us, not suddenly, but in a complicated and torturous way."³ The result of these directives was a change in strategy called *dua danh va dua dam*, whereby the Communists would "talk and fight."⁴ While their negotiators pursued Communist objectives in Paris, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops would keep the pressure on the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces on the battlefield. However, this pressure, with some exceptions, was to be applied primarily through the use of mortar and sapper attacks, rather than large-scale conventional attacks like those conducted in 1968. The North Vietnamese hoped to "hang in there" and wait out Nixon and the United States.⁵

Due to this change in tactics and emphasis, the level of fighting in South Vietnam subsided substantially during the last months of 1969 and the first part of

1970. However, State Department officials in Saigon warned in a January 1970 estimate of enemy strategy that the Communists remained confident in their ability to prolong the war until they won.⁶ Henry Kissinger made a similar assessment in a 7 January memorandum to the president in which he asserted that, in his opinion, "Hanoi would play for time until enough American forces had left to allow it to challenge Saigon's armed forces on a more equal basis."⁷ Although the level of combat in South Vietnam tapered off during the first three months of 1970, Secretary of Defense Laird told the president in an April memo that he believed the reduction in combat intensity on the battlefield more likely resulted from North Vietnamese design than from American and South Vietnamese efforts. He emphasized his perspective that the Communists still retained the strength and ability to raise the level of combat, but were probably waiting until American forces had departed before launching another major attack.⁸

Meanwhile, Vietnamization continued at an uneven pace. In his April memo to the president, Secretary Laird said that the South Vietnamese continued to lack effective military and civilian leadership and suffered from chronic instability.⁹ A *Newsweek* article around the same time made a similar assessment of the Vietnamization program. Acknowledging that the modernization effort was progressing reasonably well—over 500 gunboats had been turned over to the South Vietnamese navy, 1,200 VNAF pilots were in training with the U.S. Air Force, and a number of new and modern weapons had been issued to ARVN, including M-16 rifles, M-60 machine guns, and M-79 grenade launchers—the article noted that until the South Vietnamese armed forces faced the enemy on their own, the "report card must remain a blank."¹⁰

The continued strength of the Communists and their intractability at the Paris negotiations, coupled with the slow progress of Vietnamization, effectively resulted in a stalemate in South Vietnam. This stalemate, part of North Vietnam's plan, was becoming a contentious issue in the United States, even among those Americans who supported President Nixon's policies. Among the antiwar dissidents, the failure of the administration to end the conflict and bring all the troops home resulted in an upward spiral of renewed demonstrations against Nixon and the war.

By April 1970, Nixon had become frustrated with the lack of progress in South Vietnam. In an attempt to "drop a bombshell on the gathering storm of anti-war protests," he announced on 20 April a phased withdrawal of another 150,000 U.S. troops to be completed over the next year.¹¹ In his speech, Nixon was upbeat, saying that gains in training and equipping the South Vietnamese had "substantially exceeded our original expectations"; thus he could announce this new major withdrawal because Vietnamization was working so well. He stressed that by April 1971 he would have cut in half the number of American troops in Vietnam. However, he warned Hanoi that "If I conclude increased enemy action jeopardized our remaining forces in Vietnam, I shall not hesitate to take strong and effective measures to deal with the situation."¹²

By announcing new troop reductions, Nixon hoped to satisfy the growing de-

mand in the United States for an end to American involvement in Southeast Asia. However, he also hoped that the timetable for the phased reductions would allay any fears in Saigon about accelerated withdrawals. Nevertheless, the announcement did not please General Abrams, who thought that it made U.S. forces in South Vietnam vulnerable to new attacks by the Communists and might adversely affect the progress of Vietnamization.¹³ From a purely military standpoint, Abrams was correct; but politically, Nixon had to do something to quiet the protesters and the growing questions from the American public.

Nixon still wanted to achieve a negotiated settlement in Vietnam. He had hoped that his 3 November speech would convince the North Vietnamese that he was serious about continuing the war in South Vietnam if they refused to negotiate. The Communists, however, observed the U.S. withdrawals and concluded that the pressure on Nixon to get out of South Vietnam would only continue to increase. Therefore, the Communists could achieve their objectives by a continuation of "fighting and talking," by waiting out the American president until he had eventually withdrawn all U.S. troops. Then they could take over South Vietnam without worrying about American interference.

Angry that the NVA had not taken his warnings to heart and come to the negotiating table in good faith, Nixon decided that he needed a display of force "to show the enemy that we were still serious about our commitment in Vietnam."¹⁴ Events in Cambodia gave him the opportunity for which he yearned.

CAMBODIA AND THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

While Communist activity in South Vietnam had declined in early 1970, it had, if anything, increased in Cambodia and Laos. Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia had previously maintained his country's neutrality, despite permitting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to use Cambodian territory along its entire border with Vietnam for resupply routes and staging areas to support operations into South Vietnam. Moreover, Sihanouk had permitted supplies to land at the port of Sihanoukville and cross overland to the Communist border bases; by this time in the war, an estimated 85 percent of total supplies to the Communist forces in South Vietnam traveled via the sea and land route.¹⁵ On 18 March 1970, while Sihanouk was vacationing in Paris, his premier, Gen. Lon Nol, engineered a bloodless coup and promptly demanded that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong leave Cambodia. The Communists refused to relinquish their sanctuaries and, in conjunction with their Cambodian allies, the Khmer Rouge, launched a wave of attacks to secure a strip of Cambodian territory ten to fifteen kilometers wide practically all along the South Vietnamese frontier. The inexperienced Cambodian army was no match for the Communist forces, and it soon appeared that the North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge troops were going to take all of Cambodia east of the Mekong River. Lon Nol requested assistance from the United States.

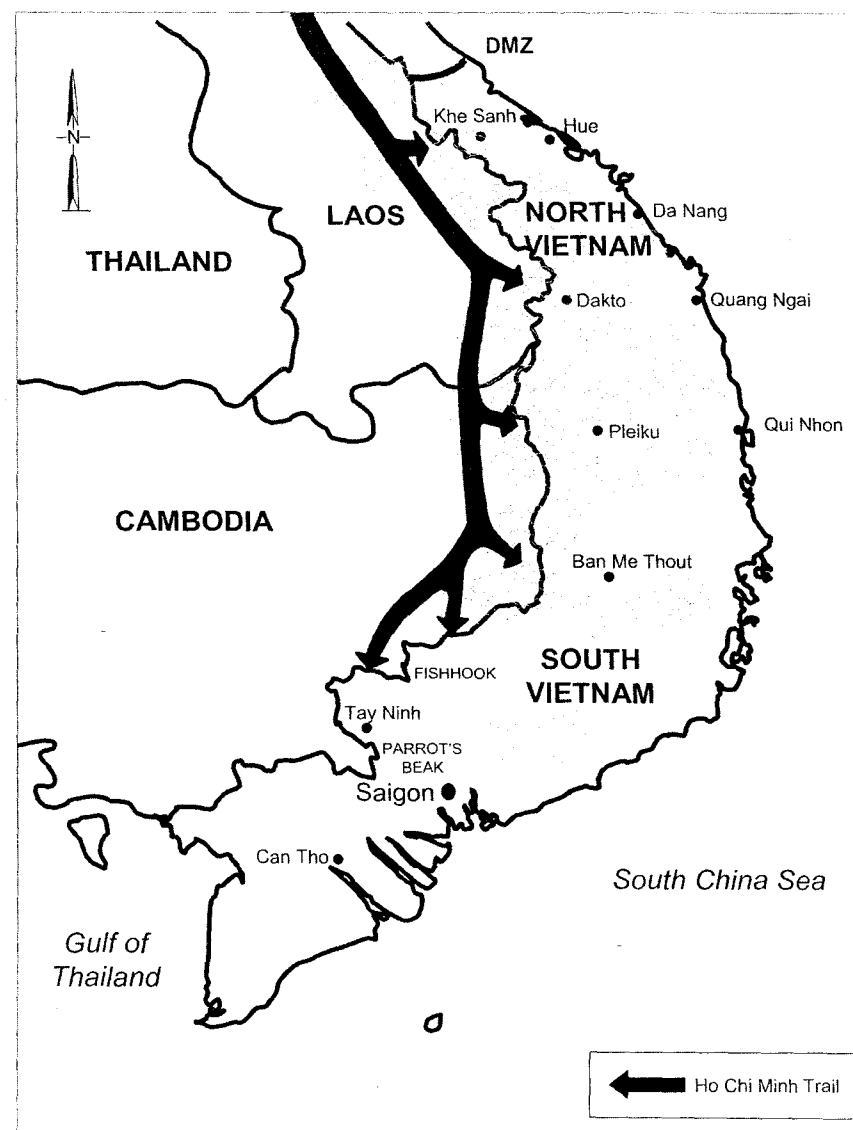
The sanctuaries and Communist supply routes along the Vietnamese-Cambodian border had long been a thorn in the side of the allied war effort. A delegation of U.S. congressmen had traveled to Vietnam in 1968 and reported that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were using the eastern provinces of Cambodia as troop-concentration areas, training centers, and logistics bases.¹⁶ The area also included the southern portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a network of trails, bicycle paths, roads (some capable of handling heavy truck, tank, and armored personnel traffic), base camps, and storage facilities that extended along the Cambodian and Lao-tian borders from North Vietnam to just west of Saigon (see map 3). An intelligence report in early 1970 estimated that an average of 4,000 tons of war equipment and supplies moved down the Ho Chi Minh Trail each month to the Communist forces operating out of numerous military bases in Cambodia.

These bases were essentially safe havens for the Communist forces, who could launch operations into South Vietnam and then withdraw into the relative safety of Cambodia, where they could not be pursued by American ground troops. Gen. Dave Richard Palmer best described the problem: "Two-thirds of South Vietnam's population lived in the southern two military regions, both of which bordered Cambodia. Fourteen major North Vietnamese bases stood inside Cambodia, three neighboring the Fourth Corps area and seven by the Third Corps. Some were within 35 miles of Saigon. As long as they remained 'off-limits' to Allied forces, it was as if a loaded and cocked pistol was being held to the head of South Vietnam."¹⁷

President Nixon had authorized secret bombings in 1969 to attack the Cambodian sanctuaries, but the trail and base area complex proved resistant to attack from the air. The B-52 raids slowed down infiltration through the area, but did not stop North Vietnamese use of the trail complex or the staging areas. By the time of the Cambodian coup in 1970, an estimated 40,000–60,000 NVA troops were in Cambodia, and they were expanding toward the central provinces of Kompong Cham, Prey Veng, and Svay Rieng, which would put them within striking distance of Phnom Penh.¹⁸

The United States could not allow the North Vietnamese to take Cambodia, because that would essentially outflank South Vietnam. The whole of Cambodia would become a sanctuary for the North Vietnamese forces, and the overland route from Sihanoukville would be opened to full-scale resupply efforts. The situation was critical, not only for the U.S. forces remaining in South Vietnam, but also for the RVNAF as more American troops withdrew, leaving the South Vietnamese to their own devices. As General Palmer wrote after the war, "So long as Hanoi persisted in aggression, so long as the NVA enjoyed sanctuaries within easy striking distance of Saigon . . . then so long would war or the threat of imminent invasion cast a dark shadow across South Vietnam."¹⁹

Secretary of Defense Laird had visited Saigon in February 1970. While briefing him, General Abrams made a strong case for invading not only sanctuaries in Cambodia, but others in Laos as well. However, Laird was unconvinced. That month, news of secret U.S. bombing in Laos had become public, prompting an im-



Map 3. The Ho Chi Minh Trail.

mediate outcry from Congress. Laird felt that neither Nixon's critics nor a growing sector of the American people who just wanted the war to be over would accept any further widening of the war.

Shortly after Laird's return to the United States, the situation in Cambodia took a turn for the worse. In a February message to the JCS, Adm. John S. McCain,

commander in chief of U.S. Pacific Forces, warned that "the Cambodian sanctuary had become a primary strategic base essential to the enemy if he is to accomplish his overall objectives against Vietnamization"; moreover, McCain warned that intelligence indicators pointed toward a major Communist offensive in Cambodia in April or May.²⁰ North Vietnamese troops proved his warning to be timely and accurate on 29 March when they began moving westward in the direction of Phnom Penh from their sanctuary bases in the "Fishhook," a salient that pushed into South Vietnam west of An Loc, and the "Parrot's Beak," Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province, where the border comes within thirty-three miles of Saigon. The NVA launched major ground attacks against Cambodian strongpoints all along the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border and then turned into the Cambodian interior. Within a few days, the much stronger Communist forces had pushed Lon Nol's troops completely out of the Parrot's Beak area, which was abandoned to North Vietnamese control on 10 April. By the middle of the month, the Communists seemed to be preparing to encircle Phnom Penh and the Lon Nol government appeared to be in imminent danger of falling.

Nixon and his advisers had been watching the worsening situation in Cambodia very closely. On 25 March, alarmed at the North Vietnamese assault on Lon Nol's forces, the president had charged the JCS with drafting a plan for an attack into Cambodia by either U.S. or South Vietnamese forces to relieve pressure on Phnom Penh should the Communist forces directly threaten the city.²¹ The JCS passed the president's directive to General Abrams in Saigon, who prepared and submitted a plan on 30 March to Kissinger and the NSC for the president's consideration. The plan included three potential courses of action: the first was to urge the South Vietnamese to increase their cross-border raids into the enemy sanctuaries (which was already happening on a limited basis); the second option was to direct the South Vietnamese to launch larger and more effective forays into Cambodia while providing additional American artillery and air support; the final option was to initiate a full-scale attack by South Vietnamese forces accompanied by U.S. advisers into the base areas and supply depots to disrupt the enemy's command and control elements, demolish his logistical installations, and eliminate COSVN headquarters.²² Nixon delayed a decision, and Abrams was told to put the plans on hold while the administration tried to determine what was going on inside Cambodia.

On 19 April, the president flew to Hawaii to greet the crew of *Apollo 13*, who had just returned from a near disastrous mission to the moon. While in Honolulu, Nixon received a briefing on the Cambodian situation from Admiral John S. McCain Jr., who stressed that the situation was becoming desperate. He told the president, "If you are going to withdraw another 150,000 troops from South Vietnam this year, you must protect Saigon's western flank by an invasion of the Cambodian sanctuaries."²³

McCain's briefing was on Nixon's mind upon his return to Washington, where a heated debate ensued over what to do about the situation. On one hand, Kissinger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, believing that Cambodia was in imminent danger of

collapse, urged the president to do something to preclude that potential disaster from becoming reality. On the other hand, Secretary of State Rogers warned Nixon that U.S. intervention in Cambodia, on top of the breaking news of secret U.S. bombing in Laos, might prove to be a political nightmare for the president.

Despite the potential debacle looming in Cambodia, Nixon went ahead with his troop withdrawal announcement on 20 April. Such a move in the face of the rapidly deteriorating situation on Vietnam's flank was fraught with danger, but the administration was confronted by a conundrum, which Kissinger later described in his memoirs: "The dilemma was plain to see. Troop cuts poulticed public sores at home, but they were evaporating Hanoi's need to bargain about our disengagement. And if Vietnamization was not making good the defensive gaps created by our withdrawals, we hazarded not only the negotiating lever but South Vietnam's independence and the entire basis of our sacrifices."²⁴

Nixon found himself caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. He had to continue the troop withdrawals or suffer a political disaster at home; at the same time, he also had to do something about Cambodia in order to protect the Vietnamization effort and provide time to continue the buildup of the South Vietnamese forces. The question was how to do this without igniting a firestorm of controversy at home.

On Tuesday, 21 April, the president met with Kissinger and Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Helms briefed the president on the Communist attacks and emphatically warned the president that the Cambodian army faced almost certain destruction. Nixon authorized an immediate transfer of funds and military equipment for Lon Nol's army. He met later in the day with Kissinger and Laird to discuss strategic options. All three recognized that Cambodia would soon fall to the North Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge forces if nothing were done. The loss of Cambodia would bring dire consequences for the Vietnamization program, destroy Nixon's timetable for achieving "peace with honor," and undoubtedly result in a widening of the war.

Later that day, Nixon sent Kissinger a memorandum that began: "I think we need a bold move in Cambodia . . . to show that we stand with Lon Nol. . . . They [the Communists] are romping in there, and the only government in Cambodia in the last twenty-five years that had the guts to take a pro-Western and pro-American stand is ready to fall."²⁵ The president called an NSC meeting for the following day. Meanwhile, the White House received a long message from Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams. They emphasized the dire consequences for Vietnamization if Cambodia fell and recommended U.S.-South Vietnamese operations against the key Communist sanctuaries.²⁶

During the NSC meeting the next day, Kissinger delivered a detailed report on the military situation in Cambodia. He emphasized that the Communists' defeat of Cambodia or even the expansion of their sanctuary areas would give them the capability to inflict increased casualties on U.S. forces in South Vietnam, and the resulting situation would almost certainly endanger the Vietnamization pro-

gram, thereby potentially forcing a slowdown in the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Kissinger enumerated three options. The first was to do nothing, which he described in his memoirs as the "preferred course of the State and Defense departments."²⁷ Kissinger's preferred option, the second, was to attack the sanctuaries only with South Vietnamese forces. The last option was to use whatever forces were necessary, including American troops, to neutralize all of the base areas; this option was strongly supported by Bunker, Abrams, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The consensus from the ensuing discussion was that the first option was not viable. The United States could not afford to let the Communists take Cambodia, despite the potential political fallout from any direct U.S. involvement. The use of U.S. troops was considered, but those at the meeting generally felt that the South Vietnamese should handle the ground fighting and that the United States should limit its role to air and fire support. Laird and Rogers even opposed this limited U.S. participation, but Vice President Agnew spoke up, saying that if the administration really wanted to protect Vietnamization, it should attack both sanctuaries and use whatever American troops were necessary.²⁸ Nixon agreed that something had to be done, but believed that the South Vietnamese should carry out the strike. He authorized American air support for the Parrot's Beak operation, but only "on the basis of demonstrated necessity."²⁹ He did not commit himself to an attack of the Fishhook area. Nixon later described his thought process in his memoirs: "Giving the South Vietnamese an operation of their own would be a major boost to their morale as well as provide a practical demonstration of the success of Vietnamization."³⁰ When the meeting adjourned, Gen. Earle Wheeler sent Abrams a message advising him to begin planning for the Cambodian operation. He said, "Our objective is to make maximum use of ARVN assets, so as to minimize U.S. involvement, and to maintain lowest possible U.S. profile. . . . U.S. advisers in Cambodia will be restricted to those required to control U.S. aircraft if and when introduced."³¹

The order to go into Cambodia was well received in Saigon by Abrams and Ambassador Bunker. The Americans had long wanted the freedom to pursue the Communists into the Cambodian sanctuaries.³² As for the South Vietnamese, President Thieu had some reservations about sending his troops into the Communist strongholds in Cambodia, but, in fact, ARVN forces had already made limited forays into the border areas. On 27 and 28 March, an ARVN Ranger battalion, supported by artillery and tactical air support, had gone three kilometers into Kandal Province to destroy a Communist base camp. Four days later, ARVN troops penetrated sixteen kilometers into Cambodia in pursuit of the Communists. On 20 April, two thousand ARVN soldiers went into the Parrot's Beak area and killed 144 of the enemy. Now it appeared that Nixon was willing to give the green light for a much larger push into Cambodia.

After the meeting on 22 April, Kissinger received a telephone call from the president. According to Kissinger, Nixon hated to be shown up in a group as being less tough than his advisers, and in this case the president appeared to be somewhat chagrined that Agnew had been more forceful than he in the NSC meeting.³³

Additionally, the president had been pondering what the intelligence briefers had told him about the Fishhook. They had briefed him that this area was even larger than the Parrot's Beak and reportedly contained the elusive COSVN, the supposed "nerve center" of the entire Communist effort in Southeast Asia.³⁴ Nixon told Kissinger that he was thinking about widening his guidance to include attacks on all the sanctuaries along the Cambodian border, not just the Parrot's Beak, as previously discussed at the NSC meeting, but also the Fishhook. Kissinger took this to mean that the president was contemplating the use of U.S. ground troops in a much broadened Cambodian operation.³⁵

Later that night, Nixon called again and told Kissinger that he wanted him to convene a meeting with Adm. Thomas H. Moorer (as acting chairman of the Joint Chiefs, he was scheduled to replace Gen. Earle Wheeler in July), Helms, and Lt. Gen. Robert Cushman, deputy director of the CIA, the next morning to "discuss the feasibility of a combined U.S.-South Vietnamese operation against Fishhook, in parallel with the Parrot's Beak operation."³⁶

The men met with the president on 24 April as scheduled. Moorer and Helms "were strongly in favor of an attack on the Fishhook sanctuary [and] . . . felt it would force the North Vietnamese to abandon their effort to encircle and terrorize Phnom Penh"; they reasoned that the destruction of COSVN and the Communist supply dumps would buy valuable time for Vietnamization.³⁷ Alexander Haig, Kissinger's military aide and a former infantry battalion commander in Vietnam, agreed with Moorer and Helms, arguing that failure to move on the Fishhook at the same time as the attack against the Parrot's Beak would permit enemy reinforcements to "flow into the Parrot's Beak from the Fishhook."³⁸ Therefore, he recommended that both sanctuaries be attacked, with the main attack being focused on the Fishhook. Haig had led a group of NSC analysts on a trip to Vietnam in January 1970 to study the situation, and although he had seen "hopeful signs," he concluded that the South Vietnamese forces still had some major weaknesses.³⁹ Accordingly, he told Nixon that while he thought that an attack into the Fishhook area was imperative, he believed that such an attack was clearly beyond the capabilities of the South Vietnamese forces by themselves. An earlier message from Abrams, which said he could not guarantee the success of the proposed raid into Cambodia without U.S. troops, backed up Haig's assessment.⁴⁰ Haig, therefore, suggested that a combined U.S.-RVNAF force make the main attack into the Fishhook, with a supporting South Vietnamese attack into the Parrot's Beak. The president agreed with the urgency of the situation and his advisers' assessments, but still demurred. The meeting broke up without a decision.

Afterward, Kissinger, at the direction of the president, notified Secretaries Laird and Rogers about what was being contemplated. Kissinger, who had less than a high opinion of the South Vietnamese capabilities, agreed with Haig and the president on the necessity for U.S. troops, but Laird and Rogers had grave reservations. They both stressed that the use of American troops would inflame the war protesters and Nixon's opponents in Congress. Nixon had already come to the conclusion that he

had to act, but he still wavered. He knew Rogers and Laird were right about the probability of strong public and congressional response to what would essentially be an invasion of Cambodia. He later wrote, "I never had any illusions about the shattering effect a decision to go into Cambodia would have on public opinion. I recognized that it would mean personal and political catastrophe for me and my administration."⁴¹ Still, he thought a successful attack into Cambodia would serve several purposes. Aside from the most obvious one of destroying Communist base camps and logistical supplies, it would demonstrate Nixon's resolve to see the war through to its completion and therefore might break the stalemate at the Paris peace talks. Additionally, and just as important, a successful operation would provide a psychological boost to the South Vietnamese and demonstrate that Vietnamization was working. At the very least, Nixon had told Kissinger, "I want to make sure that Cambodia does not go down the drain without doing something."⁴²

Accordingly, the president authorized planning for the combined attack using U.S. forces as well as the South Vietnamese, but delayed final approval on launching the operation. Abrams was cabled to begin planning for a combined attack into both the Fishhook and the Parrot's Beak to "get the job done using whatever is necessary."⁴³

On the evening of 26 April, Nixon met again with his principal NSC advisers to go over final deliberations about the advisability of going through with the operation. According to Kissinger, Nixon had already made up his mind, but wanted to discuss his decision with Laird and Rogers.⁴⁴ Kissinger reiterated the essence of the discussion in his memoirs:

Could we in good conscience continue a withdrawal from Vietnam with Sihanoukville reopened and all of Cambodia turned into one big contiguous base area? Those within the Administration who balked were mostly concerned with domestic reaction. No one came up with an answer to the dilemma of how we could proceed with Vietnamization if the entire Cambodian frontier opened up to massive infiltration. Nor would inaction avoid our domestic dilemma. If we resisted, we would be charged with escalation; but if we acquiesced in the Communist takeover of Cambodia, our casualties started rising, and Vietnam began to disintegrate, we would be accused of pursuing a hopeless strategy.⁴⁵

Laird and Rogers were vehement in their opposition to the planned invasion, but neither provided a substantive argument that swayed the president. Nevertheless, Nixon postponed the operation for twenty-four hours. According to Kissinger, Nixon delayed the attack to quiet further opposition from within the administration by giving all sides time to calm down.⁴⁶ On 28 April, the president made his final decision and Abrams was told to execute the operation. Nixon later wrote of his decision, "We would go for broke, for the big play . . . for all the marbles. . . . A joint ARVN-U.S. Force would go into the Fishhook."⁴⁷

THE PLAN

Once Nixon arrived at the final decision to go into Cambodia, the planning was left to the military commanders in the theater of operations. On 24 April, General Abrams had flown to the corps-level headquarters of Lt. Gen. Michael Davison, commander of II Field Force, to tell him to begin planning for an attack into Cambodia. American commanders, having long wished for authority to follow the Communists into their Cambodian sanctuaries, had been working on contingency plans for just such an attack since January.⁴⁸ These contingency plans were dusted off and revised to include a combined U.S.-RVNAF operation, with American and ARVN forces attacking into the Fishhook, and the South Vietnamese attacking alone into the Parrot's Beak.

Elements of II Field Force Vietnam from III CTZ would make the main attack into the Fishhook; secondary supporting attacks would be launched from II and IV CTZs. The allied attack force numbered over fifteen thousand men (ten thousand Americans and over five thousand South Vietnamese), making it the largest combined allied action since Operation Junction City in 1967. The U.S. units involved included elements of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 25th Infantry Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. The South Vietnamese forces included elements of the ARVN 1st Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), one armored cavalry squadron each from the 5th and 25th ARVN divisions, an infantry regiment from the 25th ARVN Division, the 4th Ranger Group (four ranger battalions), the 3rd Airborne Brigade, and additional units from both II and III Corps (ARVN).

The plan in the Fishhook called for a pincer movement designed to trap elements of the 7th NVA Division operating there (an estimated seven thousand enemy soldiers). To accomplish this, the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment would drive from the east and southeast and elements of the 1st Cavalry Division would attack from the west. Meanwhile, the 3rd ARVN Airborne Brigade would be inserted into three blocking positions to the north of the Fishhook and, on order, move south to link up with the 11th ACR and the 1st Cavalry units. At the appropriate time, heliborne forces of the 1st Cavalry would envelop the enemy's rear. In addition to trapping the 7th NVA Division, the allied forces were to comb the area for bases, fortifications, and supply caches. During this phase, U.S. forces were to find and destroy COSVN, which was thought to be located in the Fishhook. Another important objective was the town of Snuol, strategically located at the junction of Routes 7 and 13 and thought to be a main distribution point into South Vietnam for Communist supplies shipped through Sihanoukville. U.S. forces (including those advising the South Vietnamese forces) would be limited to operating at a depth of no more than thirty kilometers inside Cambodian territory.

The attack into the Parrot's Beak was to begin a day before the Fishhook operation and would involve three ARVN task forces, each composed of three infantry battalions and an armored cavalry squadron. During the initial phase of the operation, these forces, totaling 8,700 soldiers, were to surround Base Areas 706

and 367, in the tip of the Parrot's Beak. Upon completing that action, the ARVN force would turn west and north to secure the key town of Svay Rieng and to attack Base Area 354.

ANNOUNCING THE PLAN

On Thursday, 30 April, the day after South Vietnamese forces crossed the border into Cambodia, Nixon explained his reasons for approving the operation in a nationally televised speech. In what some newsmen described as a belligerent manner, he insisted that the move into Cambodia was "not an invasion" but a necessary response to North Vietnamese "aggression." He stated: "To protect our men who are in Viet-Nam and to guarantee the continued success of our withdrawal and the Vietnamization programs, I have concluded that the time has come for action. . . . In cooperation with the armed forces of South Viet-Nam, attacks are being launched this week to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodia-Viet-Nam border. . . ." The president acknowledged that his decision to enter Cambodia would cause an uproar at home, but said that he had made his decision without regard to the political consequences. He asserted his belief that the majority of Americans favored the withdrawal of American forces and that this action would further that end, saying "Whether my party gains in November is nothing compared to the lives of 400,000 brave Americans fighting for our country and for the cause of peace and freedom in Vietnam." He concluded, "If when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation acts like a pitiful helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world."⁴⁹

The response in America to the Cambodian operation was immediate and rapidly reached tragic proportions. An earlier leak to the media of the administration's decision to support a South Vietnamese operation into Cambodia had already produced a strong reaction in the Senate, where leading members from both parties threatened to cut off funds for action in Cambodia.⁵⁰ However, their reaction was mild compared to the one greeting Nixon's public announcement that Americans would accompany the South Vietnamese into Cambodia. An explosive outcry erupted against the administration and its policy in Southeast Asia. Nixon had promised, or at least hinted, that he was winding down the war as far as American forces were concerned; he had just announced the withdrawal of another 150,000 U.S. troops. Yet now, less than a week later, he was announcing to the nation what in effect was an invasion of Cambodia by American and South Vietnamese forces. Rather than being seen as a preventive measure dictated by the worsening military situation in Cambodia, the "incursion," despite Nixon's protestations to the contrary, looked very much like a widening of the war to many Americans. A new wave of violent protests resulted.⁵¹

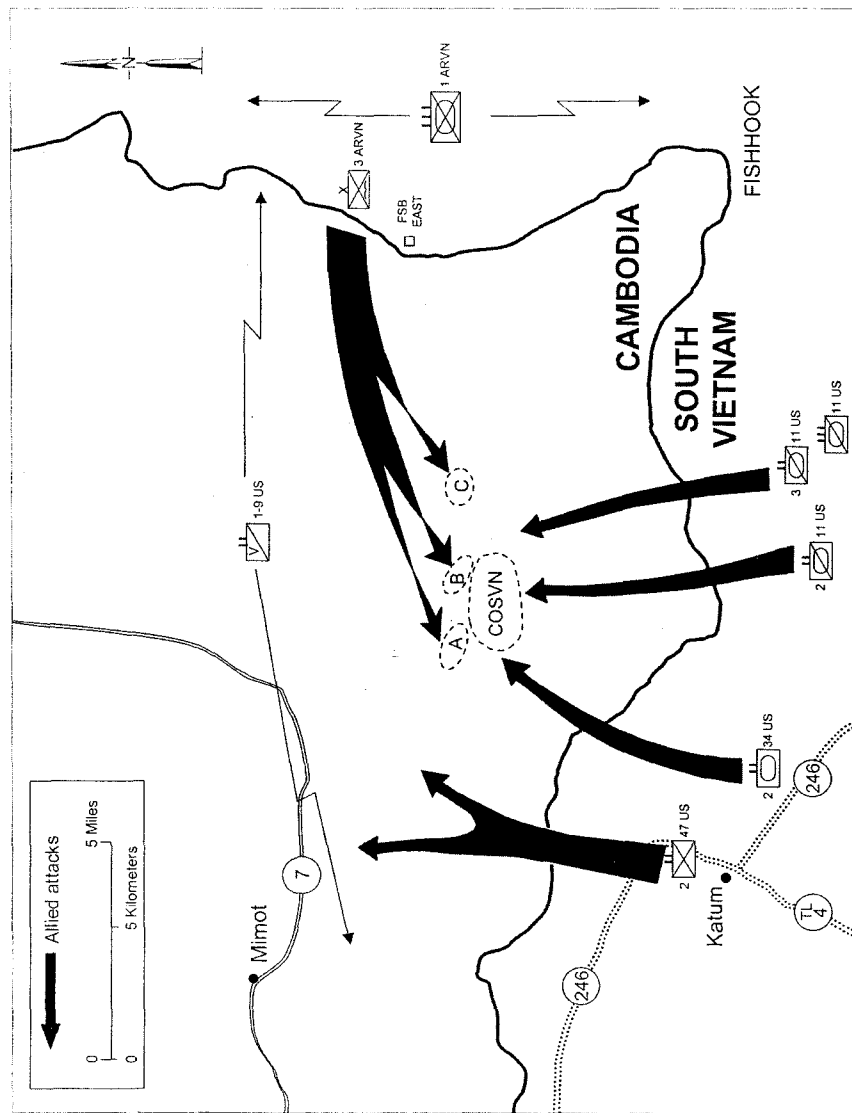
THE CAMBODIAN INCURSION

While the protests set off by the president's announcement raged, the attack continued on schedule. On 29 April, the ARVN forces had launched their part of the operation, called *Toan Thang* (Final Victory), by attacking in division strength into the Parrot's Beak. The U.S. forces moved into the Fishhook two days later. The interval between the two attacks negated the surprise that could have been achieved by a more coordinated operation, but still both attacks went reasonably well.

Before dawn on 1 May, following lengthy preparatory strikes by allied artillery and tactical air support, lead tanks and armored personnel carriers of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment crossed the border into Cambodia (see map 4). The U.S. forces expected an entrenched enemy to put up a hard fight. Col. (eventually Gen.) Donn Starry, commander of the 11th, later said, "We had reports of extensive bunker systems, antitank weapons, antiaircraft guns . . . we knew that there were two NVA regiments astride the border in that area we had to go through."⁵² However, enemy resistance was light. Presumably, the preponderance of the Communist forces had escaped farther into the Cambodian interior. Most contacts were the result of delaying attacks by small enemy units, rather than the large, pitched battles that the U.S. leadership expected. By 3 May, MACV reported only 8 Americans killed and 32 wounded, which were very low casualties for an operation of this size and scope. Enemy losses were reported as 476 killed, of which 160 were victims of tactical air strikes and helicopter gunship attacks.

There were exceptions to the light contact. On 2 May, Colonel Starry's 11th ACR was ordered to proceed to Snuol, where intelligence reports said an NVA battalion or more was digging in and preparing for battle. Starry entered the town with over one hundred armored vehicles, and a pitched battle ensued that lasted for two days. On the second night the surviving Communist forces slipped away. In the process of the battle, Snuol was virtually destroyed. The results of this action were inconclusive, because the retreating NVA soldiers had taken their dead and wounded with them when they escaped.

Maj. Gen. Elvy Roberts, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, remarked at the beginning of the operation, "We think we have them [the enemy] in a bag."⁵³ However, the attack into the Fishhook failed to fill that "bag" with a large number of enemy soldiers. Nevertheless, the operations resulted in the capture and/or destruction of sizable quantities of enemy supplies and materiel. The attackers repeatedly came upon large weapon caches and supply dumps, one so extensive that American troops dubbed it "the City." Discovered by a battalion of the 1st Cavalry Division, this area was a two-square-mile complex that included 182 separate stocks of weapons and ammunition, eighteen mess halls, a firing range, a chicken and pig farm, and over four hundred log-covered bunkers and other shelters containing medical supplies, foodstuffs, and uniforms.⁵⁴ Later, another battalion of the 1st Cavalry Division found an even larger area that proved to be the most extensive



Map 4. The attack into the Fishhook, May 1970.

weapons cache ever captured in the war; the troops called it "Rock Island East."⁵⁵ A search of this area revealed more than 6.5 million rounds of antiaircraft ammunition, a half million rifle rounds, thousands of rockets, several General Motors trucks, and even telephone switchboards.

President Nixon, exhilarated by early reports of the allied successes, ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff "to take out all the sanctuaries. . . . Knock them all out so they can't be used against us again. Ever."⁵⁶ Subsequently, units of the 25th Infantry Division invaded an area forty-eight kilometers southwest of the Fishhook, known as the Dog's Head. Additionally, two brigades of the 4th Infantry Division attacked into the Se San area, sixty kilometers west of Pleiku. By the end of May, more than thirty thousand U.S. soldiers were in Cambodia.

U.S. forces spent the rest of May and the entire month of June finding and destroying enemy cache sites. The amount of Communist supplies and equipment destroyed was staggering, but the Fishhook operation failed to achieve one of its primary objectives: the discovery and destruction of COSVN, which still eluded the allies. It was later learned that the shadowy Communist field headquarters had fled the Fishhook area on 19 March and moved west and north across the Mekong River.⁵⁷

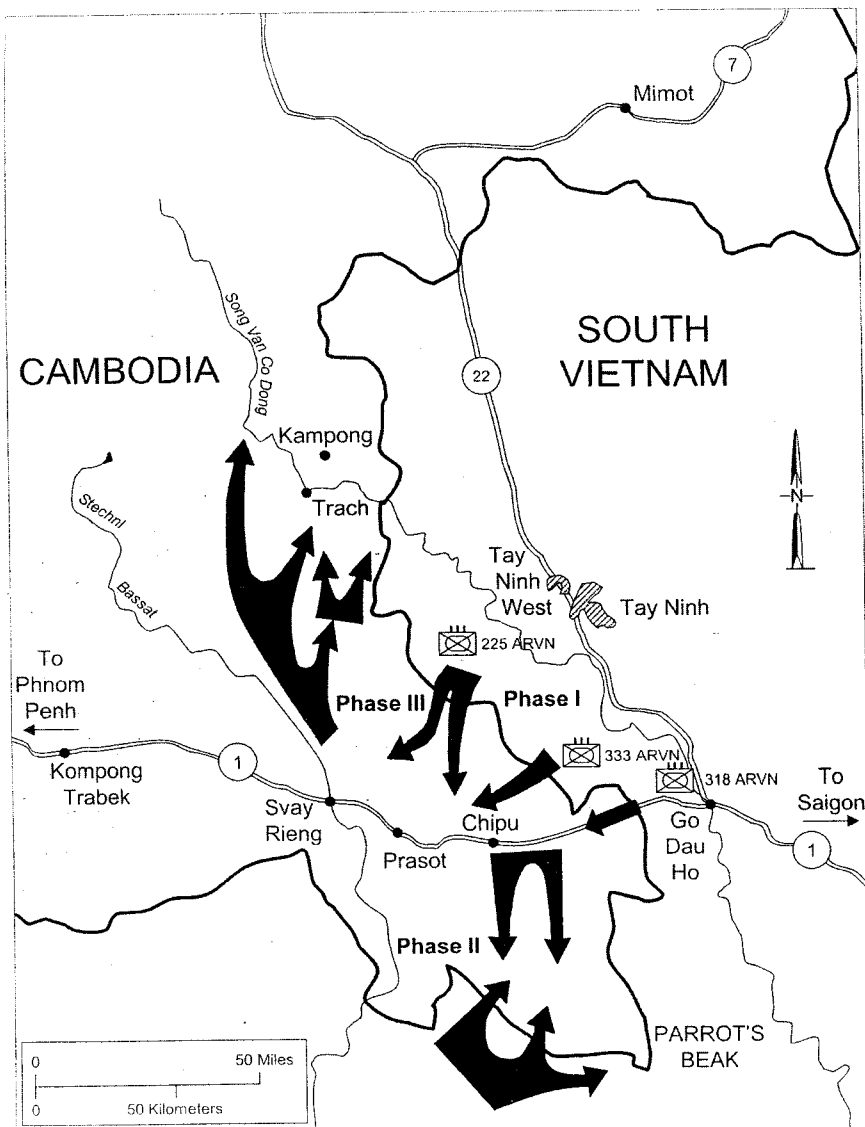
THE ARVN ATTACK

While most of the publicity and media attention focused on U.S. and ARVN forces assaulting the Fishhook, Nixon and his advisers' eyes were on the battles for the Parrot's Beak, which, with the exception of about one hundred American advisers, was totally a South Vietnamese show. The Parrot's Beak operation provided one of the earliest test cases for evaluating the efficacy of the South Vietnamese armed forces and the Vietnamization program. Accordingly, it was crucial that the South Vietnamese do well.

As previously stated, the South Vietnamese forces launched their assault into the Parrot's Beak on 29 April (see map 5). They crossed into the region from III Corps and IV Corps with three major objectives: engage the estimated ten to twenty thousand enemy troops operating in the area, find and destroy base facilities and supply caches, and clear Highway 1 and the Mekong River, the main land and water routes between Phnom Penh and South Vietnam.

To lead this operation, which he hoped would be a showcase for his newly revitalized armed forces, President Thieu chose Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, commanding general of III Corps. Tri was a dynamic and capable combat leader much respected by his officers and men. His aggressive spirit was infectious, and one ARVN general remarked that when General Tri told his subordinate commanders of the impending Parrot's Beak operation, he "could see the delight in their eyes."⁵⁸

One of the reasons that the South Vietnamese morale was so high at the beginning of the operation was that their American advisers had received authorization to accompany the ARVN units into Cambodia; thus, the South Vietnamese



Map 5. The attack into the Parrot's Beak, May 1970.

would get the benefit of U.S. tactical air support and B-52 sorties, which the American advisers could access. Additionally, because the ARVN forces were to receive long-range artillery support from U.S. 8-inch and 175-mm guns, each ARVN task force was assigned American artillery forward observers from the U.S. 23rd Artillery Group. The involvement of the American advisers and artillery observers

clearly indicated to the South Vietnamese that they would receive the full backing of the U.S. high command.⁵⁹

Unlike the situation in the Fishhook where the attackers fought only Communist rear guards, the South Vietnamese in the Parrot's Beak made significant contact with North Vietnamese mainforce units almost immediately. Over the next few days, several intense battles raged. Tri later said that in one action his men "fought the Communists in hand-to-hand combat, using rifles, knives, and bayonets. When it was over, we had killed more than fifty of the enemy, while we suffered only five wounded."⁶⁰ At the end of the first two days' fighting, ARVN had suffered 30 killed and 70 wounded, while 375 NVA dead were claimed.

After the initial battles, the situation stabilized into one more similar to the experience in the Fishhook as the main NVA body escaped into the Cambodian interior. Against only small delaying forces, the South Vietnamese reached their initial objectives, advancing west toward the provincial capital of Sway Rieng and opening Highway 1. Shortly thereafter, the ARVN forces occupied the southern half of the Parrot's Beak. South Vietnamese reinforcements from the ARVN 9th Infantry Division, five armored cavalry squadrons, and one ranger group arrived to assist in clearing the area, bringing the total number of South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia to over 48,000.

The South Vietnamese troops in the Parrot's Beak found generally the same kind of enemy fortifications and logistical facilities that had been found in the Fishhook. At Ba Thu, fifty kilometers west of Saigon, ARVN troops seized what was apparently a center for outfitting and retraining NVA and VC units. This complex covered ten square kilometers and included hundreds of houses and bunkers connected by an extensive road network.

During May and June, the South Vietnamese conducted mobile operations in Cambodia that kept the Communists off balance and forced them out of their sanctuaries. At the same time, ARVN elements destroyed more NVA logistical supply caches and facilities. The Communists attempted limited counterattacks in early June, but they were largely ineffective. Later that month the monsoon rains began, bringing offensive action by either side to a halt and, for all practical purposes, ending the "incursion." The operation had resulted in 344 Americans killed in Cambodia, and 1,592 wounded; ARVN casualties included 818 dead and 3,553 wounded.⁶¹

ASSESSING THE CAMBODIAN INCURSION

Despite the furor that accompanied the Cambodian invasion in the United States, the operation was a military success. The Communist base areas and logistics stockpiles were dealt a serious blow. The allies captured an impressive array of supplies and materiel, including 16 million rounds of various caliber ammunition; 45,283 rockets; 14 million pounds of rice; 2,892 individual weapons; 5,487 land mines; 62,000 grenades; and 435 vehicles (see table 7).⁶² It was estimated that the

captured weapons were enough to equip at least an entire Communist division and the ammunition sufficient to supply 126 enemy battalions for up to four months in the field. Additionally, 11,700 bunkers were destroyed, and the allies claimed 11,349 enemy killed (although the CIA and many in the media found these numbers highly suspect).⁶³

Noted British counterinsurgency expert Sir Robert Thompson, who visited South Vietnam shortly after the Cambodian operation, believed that the invasion achieved three important strategic results in addition to the destruction of Communist supplies. First, it prevented the North Vietnamese from immediately overrunning Cambodia and saved Phnom Penh, thereby preserving the government of Lon Nol and the existence of Cambodia as a nation (at least temporarily). It also closed Sihanoukville as an NVA supply port and forced the Communists to bring all supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, thus lengthening their lifeline. Finally, according to Thompson, the invasion showed that Nixon was prepared to use American forces offensively to safeguard remaining American troops and support and protect the Vietnamization effort.⁶⁴

For Nixon and his administration, the operation demonstrated the validity of America's Vietnamization policy. ARVN had displayed an aggressive spirit and the ability to conduct mobile operations against a well-trained, well-equipped enemy. Peter Kann of the *Wall Street Journal* reported from Cambodia in July 1970 that "Even long-time critics concede that ARVN has been operating efficiently and effectively—at least by its own standards of operation with South Vietnam. Regiments that rarely ventured out on anything more taxing than a two-day operation in South Vietnam have been constantly on the move and in contact with enemy forces for six to eight weeks in Cambodia. South Vietnamese operations in Cambodia are all the more impressive in that many have been conducted beyond the range of American logistical and firepower support."⁶⁵

Advisers with the ARVN troops reported a marked increase in the morale of South Vietnamese soldiers, who appeared elated that the war had finally been taken out of their country and into the enemy "home" areas.⁶⁶ Although the operation had many positive aspects, all had not been perfect, including some low points such as looting by the ARVN troops at the Chup plantation and Kompong Speu.⁶⁷ However, the overall combat performance of the South Vietnamese was encouraging.

The operation gained much-needed time for the allies. The Communists were unable to launch any significant operations from the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak for the next two years. Despite having provoked controversy, the president's decision to go into Cambodia had lessened the pressure in South Vietnam. The Communist sanctuaries had been dealt a serious blow, and the NVA would need months to rebuild their Cambodian bases. Having gained more breathing room for both ARVN and further Vietnamization efforts, Nixon could carry on with his troop withdrawal schedule for the rest of 1970 and into 1971. The ARVN forces' participation in the operation had greatly raised their confidence, and they subsequently

Table 7. Materiel Captured during Cambodian Incursion, 1970

Individual weapons	2,892
Crew-served weapons	2,509
Small-arms ammunition (rounds)	16,762,167
Antiaircraft ammunition (rounds)	199,552
Mortar ammunition (rounds)	68,593
Rockets, B-40 and B-41	43,160
Recoilless rifle ammunition (rounds)	29,185
Hand grenades	62,022
Explosives (pounds)	83,000
Rockets, 107-mm and 122-mm	2,123
Land mines, all types	5,487
Vehicles, all types	435
Pharmaceutical products (pounds)	110,800
Rice (pounds)	14,046,000

Source: Data from Fact Sheet, "Impact on the Enemy of the Cambodian Operations," released in Saigon, 14 May 1970. In Southeast Asia Branch Files, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

assumed more responsibility for the war, particularly in the border areas, while the American forces prepared for redeployment to the United States.

However, not everyone thought that operation was such a success. Gen. Bruce Palmer, who served as Westmoreland's deputy at MACV, wrote after the war that the Cambodian raids "fatally wounded South Vietnam's chances to survive and remain free" and that any gains "boomeranged." "Politically," he concluded, "Cambodia not only spelled a downward spiral of public and congressional support for U.S. operations in Southeast Asia, which finally became proscribed, but also eventually resulted in a drastic diminution in U.S. military advisory effort and military aid for South Vietnam. This was probably the most damaging blow of all for Saigon."⁶⁸

Palmer was at least partly correct. Despite the operation's military success, the Cambodian incursion had caused a firestorm of controversy at home. College students rose up almost en masse to protest what was to them a clear escalation of the war. Marches and demonstrations were held at colleges across the country, including New York, Ohio, Texas, California, Georgia, Wisconsin, and many other states. Before May was over, 57 percent of the country's 1,350 campuses experienced strikes against classes and protests involving 4.5 million students. On 4 May, National Guardsmen opened fire on a group of students demonstrating against the war at Kent State, killing four (two of whom were not involved in the protests). On 14 May 1970, ten days after the Kent State University killings, a similar incident took place at Jackson State College, a predominantly African American institution in Mississippi. After two nights of campus demonstrations, a violent confrontation ended when police and state highway patrolmen fired into a dormitory, killing two students and wounding twelve. On 8 May, over 100,000 Americans marched on Washington protesting the war; the government called out regular troops to handle the disturbance.

Congress's response to Nixon's decision to send U.S. troops into Cambodia was no less vigorous. In June, it rescinded the 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which successive administrations had used as authorization for the war. On the day that the Cambodian operation officially ended, 30 June, the Senate passed the Cooper-Church Amendment, which prohibited the expenditure of public funds for any future introduction of U.S. ground forces into Cambodia. The House rejected the amendment on 9 July, but the corresponding debate demonstrated that a growing number of those in Congress were clearly unhappy with Nixon's widening of the war.⁶⁹ By the end of August, the Senate was debating the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, which set a deadline for American withdrawal from Southeast Asia on 31 December 1971, allowing the president to extend the deadline by sixty days in an emergency. The amendment received wide editorial support. The *Washington Post* called for its passage, saying that it would "end the shell game" in Southeast Asia.⁷⁰ Although the amendment was defeated by a vote of 55 to 39 on 1 September, similar legislation would be brought up in Congress several more times, increasing the pressure on Nixon to end the war.

The Cambodian invasion and its aftermath also had a negative impact overseas. In contrast to Nixon's assertion that U.S. influence and prestige depended on decisive action against the Communist sanctuaries, the response of American allies, in the words of British prime minister Harold Wilson, was generally one of "apprehension and anxiety."⁷¹ In June, a secret poll conducted in four European and four Asian countries by the U.S. Information Service "showed a considerable decline in U.S. prestige—apparently as a result of the May–June operations in Cambodia—in almost all of the countries sampled."⁷²

While the antiwar demonstrators, critics in Congress, and overseas observers condemned Nixon, many Americans still supported the president. A *Newsweek* poll the second week of May showed 50 percent approval of President Nixon's decision to send troops into Cambodia.⁷³ The White House received nearly a half million letters and cards, most of which supported the president. On 20 May, 100,000 construction workers, stevedores, tradesmen, and office clerks marched through Manhattan to display approval of Nixon and his policies in Southeast Asia.

Despite this support, Nixon knew that he was running out of time in Vietnam. He had to increase the Vietnamization effort and continue the U.S. troop withdrawals before his country tore itself apart. On 30 June, the president went on television and announced the completion of the Fishhook and Parrot's Beak operations. He said: "With American ground operations in Cambodia ended, we shall move forward with our plan to end the war in Vietnam and to secure the just peace on which all Americans are united . . . [the Cambodian incursion] will save Americans and allied forces in the future; will assure that the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam can proceed on schedule; will enable our progress of Vietnamization to continue on its current timetable; and should enhance the prospects for a just peace."⁷⁴

ASSESSING THE PROGRESS OF VIETNAMIZATION

As 1970 drew to a close, military and civilian leaders on the U.S. side tried to assess the progress of Vietnamization. The RVNAF performance during the Cambodia operations, particularly in the Parrot's Beak, was greatly encouraging. The South Vietnamese had taken the offensive against entrenched North Vietnamese forces and the ARVN forces had performed reasonably well. The U.S. Army Advisory Group with III Corps (ARVN) reported that the operation "gave the South Vietnamese soldiers a psychological boost that resulted in a soaring esprit de corps." The report further stated that "of great importance was the conduct of the operation itself. Despite minor errors in planning, tactics and techniques, the operation, controlled from start to finish by South Vietnamese commanders and staffs, was an unqualified success."⁷⁵ Another after-action report from the 1st Cavalry Division rated the performance of the South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia as "excellent."⁷⁶

The leadership of Lieutenant General Tri, called by *Time* magazine the "Patton of Parrot's Beak," was particularly encouraging; he had very effectively coordinated a complex operation.⁷⁷ Tri, for his part, was very pleased with his soldiers' performance; they had done very well against seasoned NVA troops, displaying a fighting spirit heretofore not seen among most South Vietnamese troops.

Even more than demonstrating the increased combat effectiveness of ARVN, the operation greatly improved the morale of the RVNAF and the confidence of the people of South Vietnam. Even though the ARVN forces had encountered some difficulties in Cambodia, they had met the Communists on their own turf and been successful in holding their own (albeit with U.S. combat support). This was particularly true of those units that had operated beyond the thirty kilometer limitation and therefore fought without U.S. advisers. Former ARVN Brig. Gen. Tran Dinh Tho, writing after the war, said that "to operate without U.S. advisers was a source of pride for ARVN tactical commanders. . . . [T]hey felt more self-assured of their command abilities and, in fact, they all proved that they could manage by themselves."⁷⁸ Gen. Dave Palmer agreed and later called the Cambodian incursion "a benchmark in the maturing of ARVN."⁷⁹

President Nixon, clearly believing that the Cambodian operation validated his Vietnamization policy, wanted to spread the word that the South Vietnamese had acquitted themselves well on the battlefield. He told his advisers to devise "a positive, coordinated administration program for getting across the fact that this mission has been enormously successful. . . ."⁸⁰

Despite this explicit guidance from the White House and the positive reports from other quarters, not all U.S. commanders in South Vietnam were so positive about the outcome of the operation and the state of Vietnamization. Lt. Gen. Arthur S. Collins Jr., the commander of I Field Force Vietnam who oversaw the northern flank of the incursion, was particularly disappointed with the performance of II

Corps commanders and troops; he concluded that ARVN was "no match" for the NVA and that developing a reliable ARVN fighting force, at least in II CTZ, would take a long time.⁸¹

A closer examination of the South Vietnamese performance bears out many of Collins's comments. The fighting in the Parrot's Beak had not been intense over a protracted period; after the initial clashes, the Communist forces evacuated the area without putting up much fight. The South Vietnamese troops used during the operation were mostly from more elite units, like the armored cavalry, airborne, and rangers, rather than from the mainstream of South Vietnamese troops. Even when General Tri used normal ARVN units, he organized task forces under colonels and lieutenant colonels, bypassing the much politicized division commanders and their staffs, who played almost no role in the operation.⁸²

The Cambodian incursion also highlighted continuing tactical and support problems. South Vietnamese artillery still had trouble providing close and continuous fire support to the ground forces; the problem would only increase as U.S. artillery units were withdrawn and ARVN had to depend on its own artillery for support. As a result of these artillery deficiencies, ARVN commanders relied heavily on U.S. tactical air support; consequently, many advisers questioned whether the South Vietnamese forces would be able to succeed without it.⁸³ Another recurring problem was the inability of the South Vietnamese to handle the complex weapons systems that they had received from the U.S. Army. The armored units that participated in the Parrot's Beak were plagued by poor maintenance, gasoline shortages, inadequate spare parts, and faulty communications.⁸⁴

These assessments also applied to other ARVN units that had not participated in the Cambodian operation. In I Corps Tactical Zone, where no cross-border operations had occurred, Lt. Gen. James W. Sutherland, U.S. XXIV Corps commander, reported that although the South Vietnamese leaders from corps to battalion were "good to excellent," they were hampered by the "lack of competent small unit leaders" and "still not ready to stand on their own."⁸⁵

The U.S. media, while in many cases acknowledging the successes of ARVN in Cambodia, also questioned how effective the South Vietnamese forces would be in the long run. *Newsweek* noted that ARVN had developed a new confidence, but the article further stated: "Not even the intense euphoria of the Cambodian excursion can overcome low pay, corruption, and lackluster leadership."⁸⁶

The lack of leadership continued to be a persistent problem afflicting not only small units. In fact, the more serious problem may have been at the most senior levels of the RVNAF. With the exception of a few aggressive leaders like General Tri, most of the senior ARVN officers, including division commanders and those above them, remained too politicized and were more concerned with Saigon palace intrigue and personal creature comforts than with fighting the Communists.⁸⁷ A perfect example of poor leadership at a higher level was that of the ARVN 7th Division, which had assumed responsibility for the security of the Mekong Delta from the U.S. 9th Division upon its departure from South Vietnam. By February 1970,

the division, whose commanding general was by all accounts extremely weak, had "suffered severe setbacks."⁸⁸ The 7th was not an isolated case. Gen. William Westmoreland, U.S. Army chief of staff and former MACV commander, visited South Vietnam in July 1970 and saw "a need to clean house in the senior ranks of the Vietnamese Army"; he pointed out to President Thieu that there were "many young colonels capable of assuming general officer responsibilities and eager to do so" and recommended "forced retirements" for those senior officers found wanting.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, Thieu did not take this advice to heart. Senior leadership would continue to pose a serious problem for the RVNAF for the rest of the war.

Despite the overall credible performance of the RVNAF in Cambodia, serious fundamental defects clearly had to be addressed if the South Vietnamese were to stand alone once the United States had withdrawn all its forces. Poor leadership, organizational problems, politicalization of the senior officer corps, inability to provide adequate combat support, and logistical sustainment difficulties still plagued the South Vietnamese forces. Yet signs existed that Vietnamization was working. In any case, more time was necessary to cure these fundamental ills.

Following the allied operation in Cambodia in May-June 1970, South Vietnamese forces took over defense of the South Vietnam-Cambodia border in the eleven provinces closest to Saigon in Military Region III. By August 1970 ARVN had taken over the mission of securing South Vietnam's entire border with Cambodia and a large portion of the one with Laos. The only exception was a small area in the Central Highlands (Military Region II), still guarded by a brigade of the U.S. 1st Cavalry Division. By the latter part of 1970, ARVN had assumed the primary combat burden for operations around Khe Sanh and in the A Shau Valley, a traditional Communist stronghold; some ARVN units did so well that U.S. advisory teams were withdrawn.⁹⁰

Many in the Nixon administration were encouraged by these events. Ambassador Bunker was particularly optimistic about the future success of Vietnamization. In a cable to the president in January 1971, he provided the following assessment:

1970, the first full year of Vietnamization and implementation of the Nixon Doctrine in Southeast Asia, saw an increase in confidence on the part of the GVN, RVNAF, and the people of South Viet-Nam as the favorable effects of the Cambodian operations were felt, the tempo of the war declined, U.S. troop redeployments continued, and pacification gains were consolidated and further extended. . . . The Vietnamese have seen that the relatively rapid withdrawal of our troops has brought no military defeats, but rather improved performance by their own forces. The early apprehension has now given place to a sense of satisfaction that they are approaching the point where they can go it alone. . . .⁹¹

Others were not so sanguine about the viability of Vietnamization, particularly as a strategy for disengagement. The controversial plan continued to be a hotly

debated topic in Congress. Democratic senator Harold Hughes of Iowa said that "Vietnamization is a semantic hoax — what it denotes is simply an extension of the Johnson foreign policy. It will not get us out of Vietnam; rather it will perpetuate our involvement."⁹² Senator George S. McGovern, Democrat from South Dakota, was more emphatic, saying, "As I understand the proposal, Vietnamization directs the withdrawal of American troops only as the Saigon armed forces demonstrate their ability to take over the war. Yet a preponderance of evidence indicates that the Vietnamese people do not feel the Saigon regime is worth fighting for. Without local support 'Vietnamization' becomes a plan for the permanent deployment of American combat troops, and a strategy for disengagement. . . . The policy of Vietnamization is a cruel hoax designed to screen from the American people the bankruptcy of a needless military involvement in the affairs of the Vietnamese people."⁹³

Even some in the military were pessimistic about the long-range prospects for Vietnamization. An analysis prepared by members of the Army Staff for the Joint Chiefs stated the opinion that time was running out for Vietnamization. The report asserted that when the United States finally relinquished the conduct of the war to South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese armed forces would find themselves so preoccupied with providing security for the people that they would find it impossible to carry on the fight against the enemy's conventional forces, a task thus far borne by American troops. Although the report acknowledged that the destruction of enemy base areas in Cambodia might forestall a collapse of the South Vietnamese, it foresaw an eventual Communist victory.⁹⁴

By year's end, Nixon had been bombarded by a wide range of conflicting assessments. Nevertheless, he maintained the administration line that things were getting better every day in South Vietnam. Nixon later wrote in his memoirs: "As long as the Communist troops in South Vietnam could not depend on the Cambodian sanctuaries for supplies, ammunition, and reinforcements, I felt that the ARVN forces, which had been greatly improved and strengthened by more than a year of Vietnamization, would soon be able to defend themselves and their country."⁹⁵ He took every opportunity to share this sentiment publicly. On 4 January 1971, in a televised interview with four representatives from the television networks, Nixon responded to a question from Howard K. Smith of ABC, who asked what would happen in 1972, when "our role is virtually eliminated, we are passive, we have few troops there, then the North Vietnamese attack and begin to come into control of the country. What is our policy then? Do we stand aside?" Nixon replied that by 1972, the North Vietnamese might well launch an attack, "but I am convinced that at that time . . . the South Vietnamese, based on the watershed that occurred when they jelled and became a fighting, confident unit after the Cambodian intervention, I am convinced that they will be able to hold their own and defend themselves in 1972."⁹⁶

Although Nixon put up a positive public front, he was a realist. He was somewhat encouraged by the news from the battle front, but the upheaval at home, caused by the decision to go into Cambodia and subsequent demonstrations around

the country, had increased the pressure on him to speed up the disengagement of U.S. forces from the war. He realized that the American public was becoming more war weary as the fighting continued with no end in sight.

As the president contemplated his strategy for the coming new year, the U.S. troop withdrawals continued unabated. The 3rd Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division went home in October, and in December, the 4th and 25th infantry divisions departed. By the end of 1970, only 335,000 U.S. troops remained in South Vietnam. Additionally, the III Marine Amphibious Force, the 1st Marine Division, and the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment were all scheduled to leave in the first part of 1971. As more U.S. troops were withdrawn and further withdrawals were announced, morale among those left plummeted, and disciplinary problems, including "fragging of officers," mutinous behavior, and drug abuse, became the norm; the U.S. Army in Vietnam appeared to be in danger of disintegrating.

Thus, even though Nixon's Vietnamization policy apparently was beginning to show modest signs of progress, the president once again confronted a dilemma. He needed time to correct continuing defects in the RVNAF before South Vietnamese forces could assume complete responsibility for the war. At the same time, he had to keep up the pace of U.S. withdrawals. The war had become "Nixon's War," and he was under fire from every quarter to end U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. However, if he withdrew American troops too quickly, the South Vietnamese were doomed. Complicating the matter, Nixon's twin policy of troop withdrawals and Vietnamization was proving incompatible with U.S. peace efforts in Paris. Kissinger wrote in his memoirs that, in addition to the "serious blow to the psychological basis for a coherent strategy" that had been inflicted by congressional discussion of the McGovern-Hatfield Amendment, "North Vietnam had another disincentive to negotiate. We were pulling out American troops so fast as to place a burden of credulity on Vietnamization; in the process we lost the bargaining leverage inherent in offering a speedup in our withdrawals in return for a genuinely free political choice by the people."⁹⁷

At Kissinger's urging, Nixon tried another peace overture to the Communists. In a nationally televised speech on 7 October 1970, he proposed a standstill cease-fire, a halt to U.S. bombing throughout Southeast Asia, and a peace conference to bring an end to the fighting throughout Indochina. He said that he was ready to discuss a timetable for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces. He invited Hanoi to participate in a political settlement based on the will of the South Vietnamese people, but rejected the "patently unreasonable" demand that the United States dismantle the organized non-Communist forces.⁹⁸ Finally, he called for both sides to release all prisoners of war.

Nixon's proposal was significant for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that for the first time the president had said publicly he would accept a cease-fire in place, effectively decoupling the issue of a cease-fire from the question of mutual troop withdrawal. In his memoirs, Kissinger confirmed the proposal's importance, saying, "The decision to propose a standstill ceasefire in 1970

thus implied the solution of 1972. That North Vietnamese forces would remain in the South was implicit in the standstill proposal; no negotiations would be able to remove them if we had not been able to expel them with force of arms."⁹⁹ This decision would eventually have disastrous effects for South Vietnam.

The president's speech won immediate praise from all quarters in the United States, including from some of his harshest critics on Capitol Hill.¹⁰⁰ However, the hopes fostered by the speech were short-lived. The next day, Xuan Thuy, one of Hanoi's representatives in Paris, issued a statement rejecting Nixon's proposals out of hand and refusing even to discuss them, calling them a "great fraud" designed to "legalize and perpetuate the intervention of the United States in Indochina."¹⁰¹

On 12 October, Nixon made another announcement. He said that Vietnamization was going so well that he was speeding up the withdrawal of forty thousand troops and would have them home by Christmas. The announcement was a political move designed more for show than effect; the troops had been scheduled to come out in January 1971 anyway. Nixon claimed later that his 7 October speech and the accelerated troops withdrawal "went so far toward removing the obstacles to a settlement that they effectively silenced the domestic antiwar movement by placing the burden squarely on the North Vietnamese to begin serious negotiations."¹⁰² Removing obstacles to peace and quelling dissent may have been his intent, but the tactic did not work. The North Vietnamese remained intractable. Lacking their agreement to discuss potential peace initiatives, the president was forced to continue both his emphasis on Vietnamization and the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Nixon and Kissinger spent November working on strategy for the coming year. Kissinger recommended that Nixon make an announcement that he was reducing U.S. troops by another 100,000 beginning immediately and to be completed by December 1971. Thus, sufficient U.S. forces would remain to provide security for the South Vietnamese elections scheduled to be held in October. Once the elections were over, U.S. forces would be below 180,000 and the president could speed up the withdrawal by announcing smaller, more frequent reductions. Sometime in 1971, depending on the situation, the president should announce that he was ending U.S. participation in ground combat. By the summer of 1972, fewer than 50,000 American soldiers would be left in South Vietnam; that residual force would remain to assist the South Vietnamese until there was a settlement. Kissinger proposed that the North Vietnamese be offered a more rapid U.S. withdrawal in return for a cease-fire. If the North Vietnamese refused, the allies could expect a Communist offensive, probably in 1972. As Kissinger later wrote, "The outcome of the war would depend on whether the South Vietnamese, aided only by American air power, would be able to blunt the assault. Peace would thus come either at the end of 1971 or at the end of 1972—either by negotiations or by a South Vietnamese collapse."¹⁰³

Clearly, the new year would bring new challenges for the South Vietnamese and Vietnamization. Kissinger wrote, "If we were serious about Vietnamization,

we had to manage, in spite of our domestic dissent, three concurrent efforts until Saigon could stand on its own feet: American troop withdrawals; the rapid strengthening of South Vietnam forces; and the progressive weakening of the enemy."¹⁰⁴ These efforts would combine to give the South Vietnamese forces their next big test in 1971 during Operation Lam Son 719, when they would go into Laos with limited U.S. support and no American ground forces.