Vietnam, indicating that the amount would be drastically cut in the future. With the departure of Saigon's patron from the White House and the reduction in military aid, the United States appeared to be turning away from its former allies in Southeast Asia.

This perception was not lost on the North Vietnamese. In December 1974 they launched a probing attack against Phuoc Long Province in the Central Highlands to test South Vietnamese strength and the U.S. response. The operation's results far exceeded NVA expectations: by January the entire province had fallen. Although the U.S. government had repeatedly pledged support to the Thieu government if the North Vietnamese attempted to take over the country, such support was not forthcoming. Congress had further reduced military aid to Saigon and made it very clear that the United States would not reintroduce American troops into the war. Emboldened, the North Vietnamese expanded the scope of their offensive operations. When President Nguyen Van Thieu, alarmed at the NVA advances, committed what proved to be a fatal strategic error and pulled his forces back to the coastal plains, the Central Highlands fell under Communist control virtually by default.

The North Vietnamese pressed the attack farther to the north in Military Region I. Thieu's subsequent withdrawal order demoralized the South Vietnamese forces, and the retreat soon turned into a rout. Pleiku, Hue, and Da Nang fell; by the first of April, Communist troops were rolling down Route 1 toward Saigon. Although the South Vietnamese put up a desperate defense at Xuan Loc (in Military Region III, less than seventy kilometers from Saigon), the battle proved to be the last stand of a dying army. Shortly thereafter the resistance of the South Vietnamese forces totally collapsed. On 30 April, North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon and the war was over.

Although South Vietnam fell in just fifty-five days, the final North Vietnamese victory was merely the culmination of a long, slow process that had begun with Nixon's presidential election and the initiation of the Vietnamization program. The president's new strategy received an early setback with the Lam Son 719 debacle. However, when the South Vietnamese, although nearly overwhelmed in the beginning, eventually withstood an all-out NVA invasion in 1972, the victory contributed to a sequence of events that led to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the subsequent withdrawal of all U.S. troops. Nixon's policies ended the war, but only for the United States, and those policies, as carried out, coupled with the subsequent limitations imposed on the White House by a hostile U.S. Congress, laid the foundation for the destruction of the South Vietnamese nation. In the end, Vietnamization achieved neither peace nor honor.

1

Vietnamization

1968 AND THE TET OFFENSIVE

The Year of the Monkey, 1968, proved to be the pivotal point of the Vietnam War. During the Tet holiday truce of that year, North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong (VC) forces launched a large-scale attack across the length and breadth of South Vietnam. Beginning in the last days of January, they attacked or shelled thirty-six out of forty-four provincial capitals, five out of six autonomous cities, and 64 out of 242 district towns in the Republic of Vietnam. The extent and violence of these attacks shocked the American public; earlier, they had been led by U.S. military and political leaders to believe that the corner had been turned in the struggle against the Communists in Vietnam.

Despite the surprise achieved by the Communists, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces reacted quickly to the new threat, driving back the enemy and regaining control of the situation in most areas. Only in Saigon and the imperial capital of Hue did the actual fighting last more than a week.[1] In the end, the offensive resulted in a military defeat for the Communist forces, who paid a terrible price for their initial successes. Estimates put the VC and North Vietnamese casualties at between 32,000 and 58,000 killed. While the actual casualty figures may be debatable, most authorities agree that the Viet Cong suffered greatly during the Tet fighting and ceased to be a significant military threat for the remainder of the war. Nevertheless, at the strategic level, the offensive proved to be a psychological victory for the Communist forces. President Lyndon B. Johnson was shaken by the intensity and magnitude of the enemy offensive. When Gen. William C. Westmoreland, U.S. commander in Vietnam, asked for 206,000 more troops, many influential Americans, both in and out of the U.S. government, including many of those who had previously supported the war effort, began to question continued American involvement in a Southeast Asian war that now appeared unwinnable. The antiwar

movement gained new strength. On 31 March a stricken president announced he would not run for reelection. Johnson ordered a halt to U.S. bombing of North Vietnam above the twentieth parallel and at the same time proposed peace negotiations with the Communists. Saying that he was launching a "peace offensive," Johnson sent former ambassador Averell Harriman to Paris to begin talks with the North Vietnamese.[2] This portended a profound change in both American attitude toward the war and official U.S. strategy. It was clear that there was no "light at the end of the tunnel," and many Americans came to the conclusion that it was time to end the war in South Vietnam one way or the other.

NIXON ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

While Johnson was trying to deal with the ramifications of the Tet offensive, Richard M. Nixon was campaigning hard for the office that the president would soon vacate. Nixon made the war in Vietnam a major element of his platform in the 1968 presidential election. On 5 March, in a speech at the American Legion Hall in Hampton, New Hampshire, Nixon said, "I pledge to you new leadership that will end the war and win the peace in the Pacific."[3] Despite his later protestations to the contrary, candidate Nixon gave many voters the impression that he had a "secret plan" for ending the war.[4] In a radio statement on 8 March he said, "It is essential that we end this war, and end it quickly . . . but it is essential that we end it such a way that we can win the peace."[5] Campaigning in Wisconsin later that month, he clarified his position, proclaiming, "The nation's objective should be to help the South Vietnamese fight the war and not fight it for them. . . . If they do not assume the majority of the burden in their own defense, they cannot be saved."[6]

In trying to devise a means to end the war, Nixon faced the same problems that confronted Lyndon Johnson. Escalation and commitment of increased numbers of American troops had not worked; the 1968 Tet offensive demonstrated that fact only too clearly. Stalemate was unacceptable because an increasingly restive American public would no longer tolerate a long-term commitment to an unwinnable war. The answer was to get out of Vietnam, but the question—a political one—was how to do it gracefully without abandoning South Vietnam to the Communists. Nixon wrestled privately with this problem, maintaining a relatively low profile in public about the Vietnam issue in the wake of Johnson's 31 March announcement that he would not run for reelection. Nixon told the *New York Times* that he would withhold any criticism of Johnson in order to see what the president's "peace offensive" might garner from the North Vietnamese.[7]

On 26 July, Nixon flew to Washington at President Johnson's request for briefings on Vietnam from Secretary of State Dean Rusk and National Security Adviser Walt W. Rostow. After the briefings, Johnson explained to Nixon what he was trying to accomplish in the negotiations with the North Vietnamese; the president was bitter that the Communists had not responded more favorably to his peace overture. Rusk warned Nixon that in his opinion "panic" would set in throughout Asia if the United States were to withdraw from Vietnam without an "honorable" peace settlement. Nixon said that he would continue to support American goals in South Vietnam and "pledged not to undercut Johnson's negotiating position just in case the Communists came around. . . ."[8]

On 3 August 1968, Nixon revealed more of his own thinking about how to solve the Vietnam puzzle when he sent his ideas about ending the war to the GOP platform committee meeting at the Republican National Convention in Miami. He wrote that "the war must be ended . . . ," but warned "it must be ended honorably, consistent with America's limited aims and with the long-term requirements of peace in Asia."[9] Then, for the first time, he became more specific about how to achieve this peace with honor. He advocated continuing to wage the war until the enemy agreed to an honorable peace, while at the same time improving the armament and training of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops. Nixon later described his thoughts at the time: "As they [the South Vietnamese forces] are phased in, American troops can—and should be—phased out. This phasing out will save American lives and cut American costs."[10]

On 7 August at the Republican National Convention, Nixon officially received the nomination of his party for president. His Democratic opponent was Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota. During the ensuing election campaign, Humphrey, according to Nixon biographer Stephen E. Ambrose, was "trapped" because he could not break with Johnson on Vietnam, and thus he could not take a more "dovish" approach to the war that would have given the voters a clear choice between him and Nixon.[11] Nixon instructed his key staff thinkers and writers "to put the Vietnam monkey on Humphrey's back, not Johnson's."[12] At the same time, he avoided making any more substantive comments on how to bring the war to an end, making it difficult for Humphrey to attack him on specifics. It was a masterful political move, and Humphrey quickly became the target of everyone who hated the Johnson administration and its continuation of the war and/or its inability to achieve victory. The war was a hot campaign issue, as demonstrated by the disastrous Democratic convention in Chicago that resulted in rioting in the streets.

Nixon learned that President Johnson was preparing to announce a new bombing pause. Realizing that the pause would be a boon to Humphrey, he made a peremptory announcement that he would support the bombing halt and promised to "not play politics with this war."[13] His promise was hollow, since both parties had been "playing politics" with the war since the beginning of the conflict. Nixon managed to diffuse some of the impact of Johnson's announcement, but the bombing halt still resulted in a surge of support for Humphrey and the Democrats. The boost was short-lived, however, because on 2 November, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam announced that his government would not participate in the Paris peace talks. His announcement effectively undercut Johnson's peace initiative and any potential political windfall for Hubert Humphrey and the Democrats.[14]

NIXON VICTORIOUS

On 5 November, despite a last-minute flurry of activity by the Democrats, Nixon won 43.4 percent of the popular vote to Humphrey's 42.7 percent, securing 301 electoral votes to his challenger's 191. Johnson's problems were now Nixon's, and having won a victory promising to end the war, the president-elect had to make good on that pledge and create a workable plan that would achieve the promised "peace with honor." Historian George C. Herring suggests that Nixon clearly perceived that his political future and place in history would be determined by his ability to extricate the nation from Vietnam.[15] Nixon remarked to one of his advisers, "I'm not going to end up like LBJ, holed up in the White House afraid to show my face on the street. I'm going to stop that war. Fast."[16] In the end, he would not find it such an easy task.

On 11 November, Nixon went to the White House for another foreign policy briefing from Johnson and his advisers. The main topic was the Vietnam War. Nixon was briefed by Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense Clark M. Clifford, National Security Adviser Rostow, Director of Central Intelligence Richard M. Helms, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle G. Wheeler. According to Nixon, "[T]hey all emphasized that the United States must see the war through to a successful conclusion—with negotiations if possible, but with continued fighting if necessary." The briefers also warned that "an American bug-out, or a negotiated settlement that could be interpreted as a defeat, would have a devastatingly detrimental effect" on U.S. allies and friends in Asia and around the world.[17]

Clifford offered the president-elect three alternatives to consider as he prepared to assume his new office: Nixon could continue the fighting without pursuing negotiations; he could hold private unilateral negotiations with Hanoi; or he could pressure Thieu to go to Paris to participate in the negotiations. Clifford recommended the last option, saying that President Johnson could help set the stage for this approach by notifying Thieu that the talks would go on, with or without him. Clifford thought that the South Vietnamese president would thus be forced to participate. At the same time, Clifford said, Johnson should take measures to reduce the level of combat and begin a troop withdrawal as he prepared to leave office. Clifford felt that such a course would be "a major step to end the war" and Nixon could "clean up the details" after his inauguration.[18] Despite Clifford's recommendations, Nixon later wrote in his memoirs that Johnson and his advisers "had no new approaches to recommend to me."[19] Nevertheless, after the meeting, he told the press that he would fully support the policies of the outgoing president and that the Johnson administration would speak for his new administration during the following two months until his inauguration; he said he hoped that the one-voice policy would lead to "some very significant action and progress toward peace."[20]

On 25 November, Nixon met with Harvard professor Henry Kissinger at his White House transition office in the Hotel Pierre in New York. The president-elect discussed ideas on foreign policy with the man he was considering for the post of national security adviser, talking about NATO, the Soviet Union, China, and the Middle East. When they came to the topic of Vietnam, both agreed that they needed to rethink the whole diplomatic and military policy on Vietnam in order "to avoid the trap Johnson had fallen into" of devoting virtually all the president's foreign policy time and energy to just one country.[21] To both men, the war in Vietnam was part of the much larger issue of American security and influence around the world. Nixon recalled that he felt a "strong intuition about Henry Kissinger, and I decided on the spot that he should be my National Security Adviser."[22] Two days later, Nixon offered Kissinger the position and Kissinger accepted. The alliance between Nixon and his new national security adviser would have a tremendous impact on the conduct of the war in Vietnam and, ultimately, on the continued existence of South Vietnam as a sovereign nation.

On 12 December, Nixon met once again with President Johnson in the White House to discuss the situation in Vietnam, and once again Johnson urged Nixon to stay the course. The president-elect promised that he would do so and promised further that he would ensure that Johnson received the credit he deserved when the war was brought to a successful end.[23]

Later that month, Nixon and his new national security adviser made their first overture to the North Vietnamese negotiators in Paris. Using French businessman Jean Sainteny as an intermediary, Nixon and Kissinger sent the North Vietnamese a message that the new president was interested in a negotiated end to the war. The North Vietnamese responded that the chief obstacle to meaningful negotiations was continued U.S. support of the Thieu government and their "absurd demands."[24] Nixon, "neither surprised, nor discouraged" by the less-than-auspicious beginning for the new administration, later described his mind-set about Vietnam as he prepared to move into the White House: "I began my presidency with three fundamental premises regarding Vietnam. First, I would have to prepare public opinion for the fact that total military victory was no longer possible. Second, I would have to act on what my conscience, my experience, and my analysis told me was true about the need to keep our commitment. To abandon South Vietnam to the Communists now would cost us inestimably in our search for a stable, structured, and lasting peace. Third, I would have to end the war as quickly as was honorably possible."[25]

He also claimed that he had ruled out a quick military victory and "was prepared to take most of my first year in office to arrive at a negotiated agreement" that would preserve the independence of South Vietnam.[26] Little did the new chief executive realize that reaching an agreement with the North Vietnamese would take three more years and 20,552 American lives.

NIXON ASSUMES OFFICE

On 20 January 1969, Richard Milhous Nixon was sworn in as the thirty-seventh president of the United States. In his inaugural address, he reiterated his

desire to reach a peaceful settlement in Vietnam, but made clear his determination to see the war through to an honorable conclusion. "To all those who would be tempted by weakness," Nixon warned, "let us leave no doubt that we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be."[27]

On his first full day in office, Nixon got down to business. He issued National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM 1), titled "Situation in Vietnam." The six-page, single-spaced document, which was sent to selected members of the new administration, requested responses to twenty-nine major questions and fifty subsidiary queries about the situation in Southeast Asia. Among those receiving the memorandum were the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, and Headquarters U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), also in Saigon. The questions covered six broad categories: negotiations (questions 1–4), the enemy situation (5–10), the state of the armed forces of South Vietnam (11–13), the status of the pacification effort (14–20), the political situation in South Vietnam (21–23), and American objectives (24–29).[28]

NSSM 1 was Nixon's attempt to arrive at some workable strategy by seeking divergent views that would yield a comprehensive estimate of the situation in South Vietnam. According to Henry Kissinger, the memorandum was designed "to sharpen any disagreements so that we could pinpoint the controversial questions and the different points of view."[29] The thrust of the questions indicated some of the new president's chief concerns: the viability of the Thieu government and the capability of the South Vietnamese to continue the fight after any U.S. withdrawal. The genesis of these concerns was an intelligence assessment that Nixon had seen in December before taking office; in this report, the CIA had been very critical of the Thieu government and the capabilities of the South Vietnamese armed forces.[30]

Historian William M. Hammond maintains that Nixon's worries about South Vietnamese capabilities were given even more impetus when, shortly after NSSM 1 was issued, the new president had occasion to review "Vietnam Has the Resources But Lacks the Motivation to Win," an unsigned memorandum thought to be authored by a knowledgeable South Vietnamese.[31] The author of the document asserted that South Vietnam's problems were so severe that it could never survive if the United States withdrew too quickly from the war and that the Americans would have to avoid troop withdrawal timetables and continue to ensure the integrity of South Vietnam until that nation could stand on its own.[32] Faced with the pessimistic assessments in both the CIA report and the unsigned memo, Nixon wanted to get a clearer picture of the situation in Southeast Asia. NSSM 1 was designed to do just that.

If Nixon wanted divergent views and opinions on the war, he certainly got them in the wide range of responses to what became known in the administration as the "29 questions." Kissinger and his staff summarized the responses to NSSM 1 in a forty-four page paper that was circulated to the National Security Council Review Group on 14 March 1969.[33] This report revealed general agreement among most respondents that the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) could not in the foreseeable future defend against both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. In the same vein, most respondents concurred that the Government of Vietnam (GVN) probably could not stand up to serious political competition from the National Liberation Front (NLF). They also agreed that the enemy, although seriously weakened by losses during the Tet offensive, was still a viable force and capable of being refurbished and reinforced from North Vietnam.

Despite similar assessments about the short-term future in Vietnam, respondents to NSSM 1 strongly disagreed in other areas. Conflicting responses reflected two schools of thought, differing primarily on assessment of progress achieved to that point and the long-range prognosis for the situation in Southeast Asia. The more optimistic school of thought, best represented by the MACV response, and shared by Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon, and Adm. John S. McCain Jr. (commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Forces), held that the North Vietnamese had agreed to peace talks in Paris because of their military weakness, that pacification gains were real and "should hold up," and that the "tides are favorable."[34]

Gen. Creighton W. Abrams Jr., who had succeeded Gen. William C. Westmoreland in July 1968 as commander of MACV (COMUSMACV), had routed NSSM 1 down to each of his four corps senior advisers for reply (South Vietnam was divided into four corps tactical zones [CTZ], each having a U.S. general officer as operational commander of U.S. forces who also served as senior adviser to the ARVN corps commander). The replies from the corps senior advisers varied, but generally they took the same stance as that of Lt. Gen. Richard G. Stilwell, I Corps Tactical Zone in the north, who wrote "that significant strides have been made in the improvement of ARVN forces [during 1968]."[35] The lone dissenter among the corps senior advisers was Lt. Gen. Walter T. Kerwin Jr., from III Corps Tactical Zone (the eleven provinces that surrounded Saigon), who reported that he saw "no marked improvement" of the South Vietnamese forces in III Corps during 1968 and rated only one-third of the maneuver battalions in the region as "effective."[36] Despite Kerwin's concerns, he and the other corps senior advisers were unanimous in one respect: they all agreed that the South Vietnamese, after a sufficient buildup, would be able to "contain" the Viet Cong threat. Kerwin, although agreeing in principle with his colleagues, qualified his concurrence by saying that he believed that continued American air and artillery support would be needed for ARVN to prevail, even against the Viet Cong. Although the senior advisers agreed that the Vietnamese forces would eventually be able to handle the ongoing insurgency, they were also unanimous in doubting that ARVN could withstand a combined onslaught by the VC and the North Vietnamese without continued American aid and assistance.

General Abrams's staff at MACV incorporated the comments of the corps senior advisers into its response to the president on NSSM 1.[37] Many of the pessimistic comments, including Kerwin's critical appraisal, were omitted or at least

downplayed in the final MACV assessment. Much of the final report was based on a restatement of previously submitted statistical indicators of success in upgrading Saigon's forces. Still, the MACV report, which stressed the need to continue American air and ground support to the South Vietnamese, was not entirely optimistic. Although the report emphasized that significant progress was being made in modernizing ARVN, Abrams echoed the comments of his corps senior advisers, warning that "the RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] simply are not capable of attaining the level of self-sufficiency and overwhelming force superiority that would be required to counter combined Viet Cong insurgency and North Vietnamese Army main force offensives."[38] Accordingly, Abrams stressed that any proposed American troop withdrawal had to be accompanied by a similar North Vietnamese withdrawal. Although Abrams would repeatedly emphasize this point on many subsequent occasions, in the end his warnings fell on deaf ears when compared to the political necessity of getting U.S. troops out of South Vietnam, with or without a North Vietnamese withdrawal.

Differing strongly with the more optimistic aspects of the MACV response to NSSM 1 were the reports of the Central Intelligence Agency, civilians in the Defense Department, and, to a lesser degree, the State Department. Their reports were highly critical of Saigon's military capabilities and asserted that the small improvements in the RVNAF had "produced essentially a stalemate."[39] The civilians in the Defense Department went so far as to say that the South Vietnamese could not be expected to contain even the Viet Cong, let alone a combined enemy threat, without continued and full American support. Members of this group generally agreed that pacification gains were "inflated and fragile"; that the Communists had gone to Paris for political and strategic reasons—to cut costs and to pursue their aims through negotiation—rather than because they faced defeat on the battlefield; and that a compromise settlement was the only solution in Vietnam.

Thus, there existed two drastically divergent projections for the long-term future of South Vietnam and its military forces. What had been meant as a means to clarify the perspective on the Vietnam situation had only obfuscated the view for the new president. Henry Kissinger wrote, "The answers [to NSSM 1] made clear that there was no consensus as to facts, much less as to policy."[40]

Nixon faced a serious dilemma. He was not prepared to unilaterally withdraw and award South Vietnam to the Communists, but he had also promised to end the war and bring the troops home. As Henry Kissinger subsequently observed in his memoirs: "The Nixon Administration entered office determined to end our involvement in Vietnam. But it soon came up against the reality that had also bedeviled its predecessor. For nearly a generation the security and progress of free peoples had depended on confidence in America. We could not simply walk away from an enterprise involving two administrations, five allied countries, and thirty-one thousand dead as if we were switching a television channel."[41]

The new president had to devise a strategy to get the United States out of Vietnam, without "simply walk[ing] away." South Vietnam's survival remained an objective, but the primary goal was getting the United States out of Vietnam. Nixon and his advisers began to focus on a way the United States could disengage itself from the conflict and at the same time give the South Vietnamese at least a chance of survival after the American departure. The task was acknowledged as being difficult, and perhaps even impossible in the long run. Henry Kissinger later revealed the thought process emerging in the White House:

> We recognized from the beginning the uncertainty that the South Vietnamese could be sufficiently strengthened to stand on their own with the time span that domestic opposition to American involvement would allow. Therefore a negotiated settlement has always been preferable. Rather than run the risk of South Vietnam crumbling around our remaining forces, a peace settlement would end the war with an act of policy and leave the future of South Vietnam to the historical process. We could heal the wounds in this country as our men left peace behind on the battlefield and a healthy interval for South Vietnam's fate to unfold.[42]

Despite the uncertainty involved in trying to strengthen the South Vietnamese armed forces, the president and his closest advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Secretary of State William P. Rogers, realized that this was the only feasible course of action if the United States were ever to escape from Vietnam. Accordingly, Nixon ordered American representatives to take a "highly forceful approach" to cause President Thieu and the South Vietnamese government to assume greater responsibility for the war.[43]

Unspoken, but still clear to all involved, was the implication that the RVNAF would assume greater combat responsibility prior to a resultant withdrawal of American forces, which by this time totaled 543,000 troops in country. In a 25 January National Security Council meeting, the subject of troop withdrawals was discussed. General Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, remarked during the meeting that a small reduction of U.S. forces would help the president diplomatically and "convey the image of a self-confident South Vietnam."[44] Subsequently, Wheeler wrote Abrams at MACV that on the basis of this meeting and later conversations with Secretary of Defense Laird, troop reductions were imminent, but "public discussion of withdrawal or troop reduction in Vietnam should be limited to mutual withdrawal within the context of the Paris negotiations"; he further urged Abrams to "quietly put the damper on any public discussion [of troop withdrawals] by senior U.S. officers."[45] By this time, Abrams and Ambassador Bunker had already met with President Thieu on 17 January to discuss formally the possibility of American troop redeployments under the new Nixon administration. The wheels had been set in motion to remove the United States from Vietnam once and for all. What remained was to devise a means by which the United States did not appear to be abandoning South Vietnam to the Communists.

LAIRD GOES TO SAIGON

To get a better feel for the situation on the ground in Southeast Asia, Nixon directed Laird to go to South Vietnam to make a firsthand assessment. Laird, accompanied by General Wheeler, arrived on 5 March 1969 in Saigon, where they were briefed by senior MACV officers. The MACV staff emphasized the view that significant improvements were being made in the South Vietnamese armed forces. Laird declared his satisfaction but instructed General Abrams to speed up the program for turning over the bulk of the war effort to the Saigon forces. Abrams reiterated his original warning that the South Vietnamese could not stand alone against a combined threat. Nevertheless, Laird, citing political pressures at home, directed Abrams to prepare plans to put the new policy into action "before the time given the new administration runs out. . . ."[46]

Laird returned to Washington convinced, despite Abrams's warning and the contrary recommendations of his own staff who had responded so negatively to NSSM 1, that the South Vietnamese could eventually take over prosecution of the entire war, thus permitting a complete U.S. withdrawal. Secretary of Defense Laird, a well-respected Republican who had served seventeen years in the House, was anxious to end the war because he realized the traditional post-election grace period afforded a new president by the public, the press, and Congress would be short-lived. Antiwar sentiment on Capitol Hill was growing, and Laird knew that Nixon would feel the brunt if he did not end the war quickly. Moreover, if the war in Vietnam continued much longer, Laird reasoned that it would bleed American strength and credibility around the world in places far more important to U.S. security than Southeast Asia. He believed that any effort to prolong the conflict would lead to strife and controversy capable of seriously damaging Nixon's ability to achieve an honorable settlement. Recognizing that the war could last into the foreseeable future, he wanted to end U.S. involvement as soon as possible. Therefore, according to Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Jerry Friedheim, Laird was "more interested in ending the war in Vietnam rather than winning it."[47]

On 13 March, Laird reported the findings from his trip in a memorandum to the new president. He was convinced that Nixon had no choice but to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese in order to extricate U.S. forces and placate both the resurgent antiwar movement and Americans who just wanted the war to go away. He proposed a plan designed to make the South Vietnamese armed forces capable of dealing not only with the ongoing insurgency, but also with a continuing North Vietnamese presence in the South. He disagreed with Abrams that U.S. withdrawals had to be tied to commensurate Communist withdrawals and argued that the large U.S. effort stifled South Vietnamese initiative and prevented them from taking over more of the war effort. He felt that the "orientation" of American senior commanders in Vietnam seemed "to be more on operations than on assisting the South Vietnamese to acquire the means to defend themselves."[48] Laird wanted the senior U.S. military leaders in South Vietnam to begin shifting their focus from fighting the war to preparing the South Vietnamese to stand on their own. The secretary of defense concluded that Saigon's forces were improving steadily and that the time had come to transfer even more responsibility to them. Accordingly, he recommended withdrawing 50,000–70,000 American troops in 1969.

In a National Security Council meeting on 28 March, the president and his advisers discussed Laird's recommendations. Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, then serving as General Abrams's deputy in Saigon, reported to the president that substantial improvement in the South Vietnamese forces had already been made and that MACV was in fact close to "de-Americanizing" the war. According to Henry Kissinger, Laird took exception to Goodpaster's term "de-Americanizing" and suggested that what was needed was a more "positive" term like "Vietnamization" to put the emphasis on the right issues; thus, "Vietnamization" became the embodiment of Nixon's efforts to turn over the war to the South Vietnamese.[49]

Laird later described the objective of the new program before the House Armed Services Committee as "the effective assumption by the RVNAF of a larger share of combat operations from American forces" so that "U.S. forces can be in fact withdrawn in substantial numbers."[50] Such statements were clearly aimed at selling the new policy to Congress and the American public. Alexander M. Haig, then a member of Nixon's National Security Council, later described Laird's plan as a "stroke of public relations genius," but pointed out that it was "a program designed to mollify American critics of the war, not a policy for the effective defense of South Vietnam."[51]

Laird, who became the chief proponent for Vietnamization, was later characterized by Kissinger as being as "skeptical about the utility of negotiations as about the possibility of military victory; and he was politically astute. His major concern was to get the United States out of Vietnam before we lost too much domestic support. But he wanted to do so without a collapse of the South Vietnamese. Hence his all-out advocacy of Vietnamization. He generally supported a hard line in negotiations and the most rapid possible pace of troop withdrawals. He had convinced himself that Vietnamization would work; it became his top priority."[52]

Laird's dogged promotion of Vietnamization and the accompanying U.S. troop withdrawals would later bring him into conflict with the president's national security adviser (for reasons which will be explained later), but in April 1969, Laird's recommendations completely convinced Nixon, who later wrote, "It was on the basis of Laird's enthusiastic advocacy that we undertook the policy of Vietnamization."[53] Convincing the president to endorse the approach may not have taken very much. Alexander Haig maintains that Nixon had begun talking about troop withdrawals within five days of his inauguration and found the answer he was looking for in Laird's plan.[54] Vietnamization would enable the president to initiate a gradual reduction of combat operations by U.S. troops, with the ultimate goal of complete withdrawal. However, he realized that American forces could not be pulled out precipitously. Although the situation was improving in South Vietnam, a significant level of fighting persisted. Thus, American forces would have to

maintain combat operations to gain the necessary time to make the RVNAF sufficiently strong enough to continue the fighting alone.

In early April 1969, Nixon set forth planning guidance for the new policy in National Security Study Memorandum 36 (NSSM 36), which directed "the preparation of a specific timetable for Vietnamizing the war."[55] The timetable was to address "all aspects of U.S. military, para-military, and civilian involvement in Vietnam, including combat and combat support forces, advisory personnel, and all forms of equipment." The stated objective of the requested plan was "the progressive transfer . . . of the fighting effort" from American to South Vietnamese forces.

Nixon's directive was based on a number of assumptions. First, it assumed that, lacking progress in the Paris peace talks, any U.S. withdrawal would be unilateral and unaccompanied by comparable NVA reductions. This assumption was a significant change from previous ones, because it meant that the South Vietnamese would have to take on both the NVA and the VC. Second, it was assumed that the withdrawal schedule would depend on the operational situation in South Vietnam; the U.S. withdrawals would be justified on a "cut and try" basis, and General Abrams would have to make periodic assessments of their effects before launching the next phase of troop reductions. Third, the directive assumed that the South Vietnamese forces would willingly shoulder more military responsibility for the war. Based on these three assumptions, the American troop presence in South Vietnam was to be reduced by phased troop withdrawals to the eventual point that only a support and advisory mission remained. The troop withdrawals would begin 1 July 1969.

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

MIDWAY, GUAM, AND THE NIXON DOCTRINE

On 8 June 1969, President Nixon met with South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu at Midway and publicly proclaimed for the first time the new American policy of "Vietnamization." Nixon stated that there would be a steady buildup and improvement of South Vietnamese forces and institutions, accompanied by increased military pressure on the enemy, while American troops were gradually withdrawn. The ultimate objective was to strengthen ARVN capabilities and bolster the Thieu government so that the South Vietnamese could stand on their own against the Communists. Nixon announced that he was pulling out 25,000 troops and that he would pull out more at "regular intervals" thereafter. According to the president, withdrawal of U.S. forces was contingent on three factors: (1) the progress in training and equipping the South Vietnamese forces, (2) the progress in the Paris negotiations, and (3) the level of enemy activity.[56] Nixon later stated in his memoirs that the Midway announcement initiated "an irreversible process, the conclusion of which would be the departure of all Americans from Vietnam."[57]

Privately, President Thieu was not pleased with the American president's announcement. According to Nixon, Thieu realized what U.S. withdrawals would mean and was "deeply troubled" about the implications of an American departure from the war, but Nixon later claimed he privately assured Thieu through Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that "our support for him was steadfast."[58]

Despite the concerns of the South Vietnamese about the new policy, Henry Kissinger recorded that "Nixon was jubilant. He considered the announcement [of Vietnamization] a political triumph. He thought that it would buy him the time necessary for developing our strategy."[59] A later memorandum revealed that Nixon hoped that his new policy of Vietnamizing the war would demonstrate to the American people that he "had ruled out a purely U.S. solution to the problem in South Vietnam and indeed had a plan to end the war."[60]

In order to solidify the new strategy, Nixon met with Laird and General Wheeler upon his return from Midway to discuss a formal mission change for General Abrams and MACV. The current mission statement, which had been issued by President Johnson, was to "defeat" the enemy and "force" his withdrawal from South Vietnam. As a result of the discussions following the Midway announcement, a new order that would take effect on August 15 charged Abrams with (1) providing "maximum assistance" to strengthen the armed forces of South Vietnam, (2) increasing the support to the pacification effort, and (3) reducing the flow of supplies to the enemy down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.[61] With this order, the entire thrust of U.S. efforts in South Vietnam changed, as will be discussed in detail later.

On 25 July 1969, President Nixon visited Guam as part of a tour of Asia. During a press conference there, he announced a new foreign policy for the United States. He stated that "as far as the problems of military defense, except for the threat of a major power involving nuclear weapons, that the U.S. is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will be increasingly handled by, and the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves."[62] His new policy, which was really just a wider application of the Vietnamization concept, quickly became known as the "Guam Doctrine." However, according to Henry Kissinger, the president worked hard to get the press to describe it as the "Nixon Doctrine."[63] Nixon's new doctrine was based on three fundamentals: willingness to negotiate, strength, and partnership. He asserted that East and West should find ways to live together and that relationships between the West and Communist countries should be opened and maintained in order to achieve a lasting peace. Accordingly, Nixon stated that the United States would continue to honor its commitments, but that its partners would be expected to carry their share of the load. As Secretary of Defense Laird put it, "[W]hile a major American role remains indispensable, other nations can and should assume greater responsibilities."[64]

The Vietnamization program fell into line with the Nixon Doctrine. According to historian Joan Hoff, the new doctrine was aimed at "southern tier" third world countries in East Asia and provided "essentially a rationale for retrenchment, but it came to represent the formal institutionalization of Vietnamization."[65] The United States was prepared to provide South Vietnam with aid and assistance so that the South Vietnamese forces could eventually take over the war and American troops could be withdrawn. The administration believed that helping South Vietnam to stand on its own feet would provide additional proof that the United States always honored its commitments to friends and allies, and could well work toward developing a sense of regional self-confidence, self-reliance, and cooperation even after U.S. forces were withdrawn. Vietnamization thus conceived provided the first step in implementing the Nixon Doctrine. Nixon clearly felt that the way the war in Vietnam was finally ended would have an enduring impact on American foreign policy initiatives in the future.

On 30 July, on the way home from his Asian tour, Nixon made a surprise stop in Saigon. No formal announcements were made before the stop, and Nixon was whisked by helicopter directly to Doc Lap (Independence) Palace to visit with Thieu. There he told the South Vietnamese president that the United States would not desert his country and that withdrawals were necessary to maintain American public support, promising that they would be carried out according to a "systematic timetable."[66]

Having sought to reassure the South Vietnamese, Nixon then prepared to explain his plan to the American public. In a nationally televised speech to the nation on 3 November 1969, Nixon described his new policy to the American people. He said, "We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces, and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable. This withdrawal will be made from strength and not from weakness." He further explained, "The precipitant withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam would be a disaster, not only for South Vietnam but for the United States and the cause of peace. Ultimately, this would cost lives, which would not bring peace but more war."[67]

Vietnamization thus became a way for Nixon to reduce the pressure on his new administration for complete withdrawal, providing more time with which to pursue a negotiated peace while continuing to build-up the South Vietnamese forces. It was, as Henry Kissinger described it, "a plan to end the war" designed to offer the United States "a prospect of honorable disengagement that was not hostage to the other side's cooperation."[68] In time, Vietnamization became part of a wider strategy that Nixon later described as "part of his overall plan to end the war."[69] Nixon's plan included the following goals:

- Reverse the "Americanization" of the war that had occurred from 1965 to 1968 and concentrate instead on Vietnamization.

- Give more priority to pacification so that the South Vietnamese could be better able to extend their control over the countryside.
- Reduce the invasion threat by destroying enemy sanctuaries and supply lines in Cambodia and Laos.
- Withdraw the half million American troops from Vietnam in a way that would not bring collapse in the South.
- Negotiate a cease-fire and a peace treaty.
- Demonstrate our willingness and determination to stand by our ally if the peace agreement was violated by Hanoi, and assure South Vietnam that it would continue to receive our military aid as Hanoi did from its allies, the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, China.

Nixon and his advisers optimistically perceived that Vietnamization could bring the additional benefit of a quicker end to the war. Aside from strengthening Thieu's forces so that they could assume more responsibility for the fighting, the policy also might encourage the North Vietnamese to be more receptive to a negotiated peace. According to Nixon, "If the enemy feels that we are going to stay there long enough for the South Vietnamese to be strong enough to handle their own defense, then I think they have a real incentive to negotiate, because if they have to negotiate with a strong, vigorous South Vietnamese government, the deal they make with them isn't going to be as good as the deal they might get now."[70]

The public support for Vietnamization was initially extremely positive. Many Americans responded very favorably to the new policy, hoping that the initial withdrawal of 25,000 troops was a prelude to an eventual complete withdrawal of all U.S. forces from South Vietnam.[71] Many in the American press also were encouraged by Nixon's change in strategy, and while some columnists like Rowland Evans and Robert Novak were concerned about the ability of the South Vietnamese to take over the war effort, the media reports and commentaries preceding and immediately following the announcement of Nixon's new strategy were generally favorable.[72] Such support would prove short-lived.

PRECURSORS TO VIETNAMIZATION

Despite Nixon's rhetoric to the contrary, what he called "Vietnamization" was not an entirely new idea.[73] It was first discussed in 1967 after nearly three years of full-scale U.S. combat involvement in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland, then MACV commander, spoke in November 1967 during a National Press Club speech of gradually turning over the fighting to the South Vietnamese. He said that in 1968 the United States would undertake "Phase III" of its war strategy, which would include an upgrading of the South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces, providing ARVN with new equipment to prepare it to "take on an ever-increasing share of the war," and transferring "a major share" of the frontline defense of the

DMZ to the South Vietnamese forces. He further stated that during "Phase IV" U.S. forces could "begin to phase down" as ARVN developed its capabilities and began to "take charge of the final mopping up of the Vietcong" and "show[ed] that it can handle the Vietcong."[74] The objective of this plan was to upgrade the South Vietnamese forces so that they could handle a continued Viet Cong insurgency after the departure of U.S. forces. The plan, however, did not envision that the South Vietnamese armed forces would be able to deal with North Vietnam's army.

Measures under this plan had already been initiated when Nixon took office. So by the time that Nixon, Laird, and Kissinger had formulated their new strategy for ending the war, the strategic ingredients were already in place and the process was ongoing. Former ARVN general Nguyen Duy Hinh has suggested that the considerable development of the RVNAF in the year before Nixon assumed office may have been an important factor that influenced the new president's thinking when he considered ways to end the war for the Americans.[75]

However, a key difference distinguished the plans that Westmoreland initiated and those ordered by Nixon: under the Nixon and Laird plan, the South Vietnamese would be expected to fight both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army after the eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops. The distinction would prove critical during the period between the policy's initiation and the ultimate defeat of the South Vietnamese in 1975.

2

Implementing the New Strategy

THE NEW STRATEGY

As the man charged with executing Nixon's new strategy, Gen. Creighton Abrams, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, was given what Henry Kissinger called "one of the most thankless tasks ever assigned an American general," the dismantling of a force more than half a million men strong, while maintaining security and training another army to take over.[1] Kissinger described the situation that Abrams faced: "It was painful to see General Abrams, epitome of the combat commander, obviously unhappy, yet nevertheless agreeing to a withdrawal of 25,000 combat troops. He knew then that he was doomed to a rearguard action, that the purpose of his command would increasingly become logistic redeployment and not success in battle. He could not possibly achieve the victory that had eluded us at full strength while our forces were constantly dwindling. It remained to sell this proposition to President Thieu."[2] Despite the difficulties and potential dangers involved, Abrams accepted his marching orders and began the disengagement of American forces and the Vietnamization of the war.

The Vietnamization program would be implemented in three phases. In the first phase, responsibility for the bulk of the ground combat against Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces would be turned over gradually to the RVNAF. During this phase, the United States would continue to provide air, naval, and logistical support. The second phase, the development of RVNAF's capability to achieve self-reliance, involved increasing their artillery, air, and naval assets, as well as providing other support activities. Designed to proceed simultaneously with the first phase, the second phase would require much more time. Even after the bulk of U.S. combat forces were withdrawn, U.S. forces would continue to provide support, security, and training personnel. The third phase involved the reduction of the American presence to a strictly military advisory role, with a small security element