From “Americanization” to “Vietnamization”: Johnson’s and Nixon’s Vietnam War Policies (1963-1972)

Zehao Li

Asheville School, North Carolina, USA

li82839880580@yahoo.com

Abstract. This article examines the transformation of U.S. policy during the Vietnam War, specifically under Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, highlighting the shift from "Americanization" to "Vietnamization." Initially, Johnson escalated U.S. intervention in Vietnam, driven by Cold War dynamics, domestic pressures, and deteriorating conditions in South Vietnam. This approach, characterized by increased military deployment, sought to counter the spread of communism and stabilize the region. However, the war's protracted nature and mounting domestic opposition led to a strategic pivot under Nixon, who initiated "Vietnamization," gradually withdrawing U.S. troops and transferring combat responsibilities to South Vietnamese forces. The essay argues that this policy transformation was influenced by a complex interplay of military, political, and socio-economic factors, both domestic and international. Ultimately, the U.S. faced a strategic and moral dilemma, balancing its global commitments with growing public disillusionment, which culminated in a controversial and contested withdrawal from Vietnam. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of how these administrations navigated the challenges of war, shaping the broader contours of U.S. foreign policy during a turbulent era.

Keywords: “Americanization”, “Vietnamization”, The Vietnam War

1 Introduction

On January 20, 1969, President Richard Nixon stated in his inaugural speech, “We are caught in war, wanting peace. We are torn by division, wanting unity.” [1] The largest and most significant U.S. military conflict since World War II, the Vietnam War (1955-1975) left the United States mired in division and torn apart by conflict, and its impact on the country and the world at large was profound. The Vietnam War was not solely a conflict between North and South Vietnam over governance and reunification; it also drew in the U.S., Russia, China, and several other global powers. Moreover, the war’s outcome was shaped not just by military strength but by various other influences, including political dynamics, diplomacy, and social movements. This paper argues that these factors collectively influenced the shift in U.S. policy on the Vietnam War from "Vietnamization" to "Americanization."

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Vietnam had been a French colony from 1885 until World War II, when it was occupied by Japan. After Japan's surrender to the Allies in August 1945, the southern section of Vietnam was taken over by the British army, while the Nationalist Army of the Republic of China occupied the north. Then in September 1945, after the British troops withdrew, the southern region was returned to France, which supported efforts by the former emperor, Bảo Đại, to establish the state of South Vietnam with its capital in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). As for the north, once the Nationalist army withdrew in 1946, the League for the Independence of Vietnam (Viet Minh) led by Ho Chi Minh founded the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, also known as North Vietnam, in Hanoi. France then fought a nine-year war with North Vietnam in an attempt to regain control of the region, but lost the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Then, in May 1954, in an attempt to negotiate an end to the conflict, France and North Vietnam signed the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities and adopted the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference, which formally divided the country into North and South Vietnam, bounded by the 17th parallel.

Yet President Eisenhower was not satisfied with the Geneva Conference, and wrote a letter to Churchill in which he argued that "the ultimate impact of bringing Indochina into the hands of the Communist Parties could be disastrous for our global strategic position and to the balance of power throughout Asia and the Pacific." So in 1955, as part of effort to restrain the proliferation of communism, the Eisenhower administration took over France's failed attempt to control Vietnam by establishing a pro-American democratic regime in the South. The foreign policy of Eisenhower was deemed the "New Look". Then, in 1961, the Kennedy administration launched a "special warfare" campaign, initiating what became known as the Vietnam War with an infusion of funds, weapons and personnel. This policy was called "Flexible Response."

Although President Johnson initially considered avoiding escalation of the conflict in order to concentrate on domestic reforms following his election in 1964, he eventually expanded the scale of the war effort after the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam, the Secretary of Defense, and other high-level officials advocated sending more troops to continue the large-scale bombing of North Vietnam, at which point the number of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam increased to more than 500,000. But as the war continued, the U.S. military was pulled deeper down into a quagmire and the hope of victory grew increasingly faint. In 1967-1968, with the war at a stalemate and increasingly vocal anti-war voices at home, the U.S. began to pursue a policy of de-escalation which culminated in President Nixon's 1969 decision to "Vietnamize" the war by withdrawing troops in order to "let Vietnamese fight Vietnamese". Finally, in April 1975, as the U.S. troops executed a "dignified withdrawal" from the Vietnamese battlefield, North Vietnam occupied the southern capital of Saigon and the war ended with the defeat of the United States and the South Vietnamese regime.

Hence, the U.S. underwent a shift in policy from "Americanization" to "Vietnamization" during the Johnson and Nixon administrations, which reflected not only military considerations related to the war but was also informed by changes to the domestic and foreign affairs of the United States. At the time Nixon became president, the United States was in an internal and external predicament. On the diplomatic front,

the rapid economic growth of Japan and Western Europe and their increasingly independent tendencies began to challenge the power position of the U.S. The Soviet Union took advantage of the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War to greatly expand its military power, so that the U.S.-Soviet power dynamics had changed to the detriment of the United States. On the domestic front, the Vietnam War not only severely constrained economic development, but also became one of the most important factors in the social unrest of the United States. The American people were increasingly tired of the war. All these factors indicated that the U.S. policy toward Vietnam needed to be changed urgently. In order to explore the reason of the transformation of American Vietnam war policy, this article is divided into four parts. The first part will introduce the background and history of the Vietnam War; the second part will explore the interventionist policies of the United States under President Johnson; the third part will focus on the withdrawal of the US troops under President Nixon; and fourth part will examine the "Vietnamization" of the War and the American Retreat. This article argues that the decision of the US Vietnam War policy underwent a dynamic and complex process of change. This process was influenced by various factors, including the domestic and foreign realm, military developments, and economics. At its core, these influences revolved around competing understandings of the US national interest.

2 The Beginning of "Americanization": Johnson AND THE Escalation of the War

After President Johnson took office, he did not immediately make the decision to escalate the war, hoping instead that the South Vietnamese regime would deal with the North Vietnamese army by itself. But the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the threat from China and the deteriorating political and military situation in the South prompted President Johnson to bomb North Vietnam, at which point the U.S. policy toward the Vietnam War became one of "Americanization".

When Johnson became president in November 1963, the South Vietnamese military was in dire straits. At this time, the South Vietnamese regime had just undergone a dramatic change. On November 1, Ngo Dinh Diem, who had ruled South Vietnam for eight years, was ousted in a military coup and was killed the next day. He was "an autocratic, nepotistic ruler who valued power more than either his relations with the Vietnamese people or progress in fighting the communists." [2] In Vietnam, Buddhists formed the majority of the population. As a Catholic, Ngo Dinh Diem carried out widespread persecution against Buddhists. Additionally, he practiced nepotism and allowed his brother and sister-in-law to manipulate political power extensively. This greatly displeased President Kennedy. Diem also refused to be a puppet of the Americans, leading to escalating tensions between them. Ultimately, President Kennedy tacitly permitted South Vietnamese officers, including Duong Van Minh, to stage a coup. Ngo Dinh Diem was forced to flee and was subsequently killed. Consequently, South Vietnamese politics fell into turmoil, never again having a stable ruler.

In the fight against the Viet Cong, the situation in South Vietnam was equally bleak. Viet Cong was a guerrilla force controlled and supported by the North Viet-

namese Army. Initially formed in the mid-1950s as an alliance of groups opposing President Diem's government, it became the military wing of the National Liberation Front (NLF) in 1960, engaging in combat against South Vietnam (late 1950s–1975) and the United States (early 1960s–1973). After visiting South Vietnam in December 1963 and March 1964, Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, wrote to the President that “the situation has unquestionably been growing worse, at least since September: in terms of government control of the countryside, about 40% of the territory is under Viet Cong control or predominant influence. In 22 of the 43 provinces, the Viet Cong control 50% or more of the land area.” [3]

Shortly thereafter, Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested bombing North Vietnam as part of a larger strategic shift from stabilizing and assisting the South Vietnamese regime to directly confronting the North. But President Johnson was slow to make a decision, as he did not want the escalation of the war to be used against him in the upcoming elections. In fact, even as the political and military situation in the South continued to grow worse, Johnson maintained hope that the situation would stabilize so that the bombing could be completed by the South Vietnamese army.

However, on August 2, 1964, the destroyer USS Maddox, while on an electronic reconnaissance mission in the Gulf of Tonkin, was attacked by a North Vietnamese patrol torpedo boat. Two days later, on August 4, during a National Security Council meeting, President Johnson decided to retaliate by bombing several North Vietnamese bases and oil depots. This action was subsequently authorized by Congress on August 6, 1964, through the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Providing that “the United States will take all necessary measures, including the use of armed force, to assist any member states and protectorates of the Southeast Asian Collective Defense Treaty Organization in defense of their freedom,” this resolution empowered the president to escalate the war, effectively authorizing that the U.S. remain in the Vietnam for several more years.

That said, even after the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Johnson continued to hesitate out of concern that the bombing campaign would trigger conflicts with China and the Soviet Union. As suggested by Maxwell D. Taylor, the U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, in an August 18, 1964 telegram to the State Department, “the United States should avoid getting involved in military conflicts with North Vietnam or even with Red China” until the political situation in South Vietnam stabilized.

However, in the autumn of 1964, unsettling news came from both China and the Soviet Union. On October 15th, a coup took place in the Soviet Union. The supreme leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, was forced to step down, and Leonid Brezhnev took his place. Would Brezhnev continue Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence with the U.S.? Would the deteriorating relationship between China and Russia change with Khrushchev's departure? Without clear answers to these questions, many experts felt that the U.S. needed to reaffirm its international commitments—including backing South Vietnam—to discourage renewed Soviet expansionism.

The day after the coup in Russia, China successfully detonated its first atomic bomb. To the U.S. government, a nuclear-armed China posed an increased threat to the security of Southeast Asia. In a speech on October 18th, Johnson said, “No American should treat this matter lightly…Until this week, only four powers (America, Britain, Russia, and France) had entered the dangerous world of nuclear explosions. All four are sober and serious states, with long experience as major powers in the modern world. Communist China has no such experience.” [4] A nuclear China also reminded Johnson of the upheaval that China brought to the domestic political situation in the United States in the early 1950s. All senior government officials recalled the "loss" of China and the McCarthyist backlash that followed. Under the influence of McCarthyism, many American officials within the government who were knowledgeable about China and the Soviet Union were politically persecuted and lost their jobs. Political scrutiny in the name of anti-communism led to widespread fear. As Johnson recalled “I knew Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over in China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.” [5] The threat from China, coupled with the changes in the Soviet political landscape, reinforced Johnson's determination to preserve the South Vietnamese regime and pushed him towards deeper involvement in Vietnam.

By September 1964, however, U.S. intelligence indicated that South Vietnamese military morale was at an all-time low, that senior officers had grown defeatist, and that North Vietnamese military personnel continued to infiltrate South Vietnam. The intelligence services and Taylor’s estimates of the deteriorating situation heightened the concerns of Johnson and his staff, many of whom contended during a meeting on October 27, 1964 that the U.S. should take strong military action against North Vietnam to prevent the collapse of its position in Southeast Asia. Then, after President Johnson won the general election in November 1964 and North Vietnam continued to attack U.S. forces, the decision was finally made in February 1965 to begin the bombing of North Vietnam.

Known as “Operation Rolling Thunder,” this protracted bombing campaign was to be conducted by the U.S. Air Force and Navy along with the South Vietnamese Air Force, with one or two air raids per week. It was intended to boost the morale of South Vietnamese forces, cause North Vietnam to abandon its infiltration of the South, and destroy its transport systems, industrial bases and air defense facilities. Almost at the same time of the Rolling Thunder campaign, the president also planned to introduce the U.S. Marine and ground forces into South Vietnam. First, Johnson dispatched two Marine battalions to safeguard a large American airbase in South Vietnam. About one month later, on April 3, 1965, following a notable Vietcong bombing of the US embassy in Saigon, Johnson dispatched additional Marines and assigned them the broader mission of conducting independent offensive operations.

Yet it soon became clear that the bombing campaign’s effects were limited. Although the North Vietnamese were caught off guard at first, as they failed to prevent the U.S. from switching from a “special war” to “limited war”, they were determined to fight the United States to the end and were not deterred by this show of force. The

North Vietnamese did not want their enemies to think they were weak, so they resisted tenaciously. In addition, China sent air defense, engineering, railway, logistics support and other support troops to North Vietnam to help them deal with the American bombing. The Soviet Union also promised to provide more military assistance to North Vietnam This in turn prompted the U.S. to consider sending more ground troops into the field, thereby leading the country further into what became the quagmire of the Vietnam War.

3 The Dispatch of Additional Troops and the Americanization of the Vietnam War

Rather than breaking the will of the North Vietnamese, the U.S. air strikes on North Vietnam starting in the spring of 1965 made its soldiers even more determined and led to the deterioration of the military situation in the South. According to one CIA report, the morale of the Saigon government forces in April 1965 was so low that the rate of desertion was as high as 50%. At the same time, with more than 37,000 active troops and 100,000 guerrilla fighters, the military strength of the Viet Cong increased dramatically as two battalions were sent into the Central Plateau to attack South Vietnam. When William C. Westmoreland, Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. military in Vietnam, recommended that more U.S. troops be sent, President Johnson had Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara meet with U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell D. Taylor and others to discuss their next move.

On April 20, 1965, McNamara, Westmoreland and Taylor along with Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle Wheeler, Commander of U.S. Pacific Forces Ulysses Sharp, and Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs William Bundy gathered in Honolulu to discuss countermeasures to the recent offensive and debate whether to increase the number of troops in South Vietnam. While Taylor advocated for a gradual increase in the deployment of additional forces, Westmoreland and others pushed for rapid and large-scale reinforcements based on the belief that the South Vietnamese would be unable to defend against the Viet Cong attack. In the end, it was decided that McNamara would propose the deployment of 33,500 additional marines and logistics units to prevent the South Vietnamese army from suffering heavy losses, bringing the total number of U.S. troops in Vietnam to 82,000. McNamara's request was approved by President Johnson the next day, opening the door for the war's escalation.

Despite these additional troops, conditions on the battlefield did not improve much. In June 1965, the Viet Cong's summer offensive forced the South Vietnamese government to relinquish control over rural areas outside the Mekong Delta, demonstrating the North Vietnamese determination to resist U.S. forces even while suffering heavy losses. Furthermore, by July, with the number of Viet Cong troops increasing to 53,000, a growing number of senior U.S. officials demanded that the military dispatch additional ground forces. As explained by Taylor in a June 5, 1965 telegram to Washington:

"Hanoi and Liberation Front broadcasts have presented this new campaign as a show of Communist resolve to continue the war despite increased U.S. involvement in North and South Vietnam. So far, the enemy has not fully deployed its forces, with only two of nine Viet Cong regiments heavily engaged. The Viet Cong, leveraging favorable terrain and weather, are expected to make further gains. Given the ARVN [The Army of the Republic of Vietnam]'s limited reserves, deploying U.S. ground forces will likely be necessary." [6]

In a telegram two days later, Westmoreland also explained to Sharp that the conflict in Southeast Asia was escalating and that the U.S. would need to increase its forces on the ground by an additional 93,000 troops in order to convince the Viet Cong that they could not win. This proposal, which would bring the total number of U.S. troops in Vietnam to 175,000, caused an uproar in Washington, and Johnson convened a Cabinet meeting to discuss it. While Sharp strongly supported Westmoreland's proposal, some representatives of the State Department feared that such a large-scale escalation would turn the conflict into a "white man's war," but President Johnson remained undecided.

After the meeting, several senior officials continued to advise Johnson in the form of memorandums. Undersecretary of State George Ball recommended negotiating with North Vietnam, noting that "the more troops we put in Vietnam, the harder it will be to get out at an acceptable cost" while "a compromise settlement on Vietnam will not have much impact on the credibility of our obligations around the world." Yet Ball's proposal was opposed by other senior officials such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk and McNamara, who sought an increase in ground troops while leaving open the possibility of negotiations. According to McNamara, increasing the military power of the U.S. and South Vietnam would convince the Viet Cong that they would not be able to win, while seeking dialogue with the Viet Cong and Beijing through diplomatic channels would help win the support of the American people and U.S. allies. At the same time, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy advocated that existing forces should hold their positions for the next two months to test the effectiveness of the U.S. military against the Viet Cong, while preparing to send more troops by the end of the year.

Notwithstanding these differences of opinion, however, the vast majority of people around Johnson, including Bundy, tended to push for an escalation of the war without considering its consequences. During a July 22, 1965 meeting, Johnson asked his Army Chief of Staff, "If we come in with hundreds of thousands of men and billions of dollars, won't this cause China and Russia to come in?" [5] Although the Chief of Staff initially discounted this possibility, he eventually conceded after a long silence that China and Russia's involvement in Vietnam would be "a whole other ball game." [7] In the end, neither Johnson nor his military advisors seriously considered the possibility of China and the Soviet Union entering the war.

On July 27, 1965, following a series of additional meetings, President Johnson approved plans for additional troops which would include the mobilization of 44 battalions followed by two additional brigades, bringing the total number of U.S. troops in Vietnam to 184,000 by the end of the year. In retrospect, Johnson's decision to send more troops to fight directly with the Viet Cong was largely viewed as the beginning

of the United States’ entry into the Asian ground war, thereby marking what later became known as the “Americanization” of the Vietnam War. While Johnson could not see how “to get out of there once we are committed” (as he famously told a senator in 1964 concerning American involvement in Vietnam), neither could he see a way to avoid being the president who “lost” the war should he not continue to send troops.[8]

4 The Beginning of De-Escalation

After America’s large-scale increase in troops and air strikes, the deterioration of the situation was temporarily contained, but the United States still saw no hope of victory. With the assistance of China and the Soviet Union, the power of the Viet Cong continued to develop. According to U.S. statistics, in July 1965 Viet Cong's troops had five regiments consisting of 48,550 soldiers, but in November 1965 the troops rose from to 12 regiments consisting of 63,550 soldiers. The United States was shocked by the scale of North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam and its speed of the increase in troops. In the summer of 1966, McNamara summoned experts to evaluate the effectiveness of the American surge and air raids, and the results were pessimistic. The report concluded that by July 1966, the United States’ bombing of North Vietnam had not caused a significant, direct impact and that Hanoi was still able to support and launch military operations in the South on its current scale. The damage of North Vietnamese installations and equipment caused by Rolling Thunder was compensated for by a steady stream of Soviet and Chinese military and economic aids. The report estimated that by July 15, 1966, North Vietnam had suffered calculable losses of $86 million, but in 1965 alone, aid from the Soviet Union and China amounted to $250 - 400 million.

Instead of eliminating North Vietnam's main forces, U.S. direct intervention plunged itself deep into the quagmire of war. Within the US government, anti-war voices supporting de-escalation grew stronger. In May 1967, McNamara presented President Johnson with a memorandum that reflected Americans’ pessimism and negative views on the war overall, in which he wrote:

“Most Americans do not know how we got where we are, and most, without knowing why, but taking advantage of hindsight, are convinced that somehow we should not have gotten this deeply in. All want the war ended and expect their President to end it.” [8]

McNamara recommended limiting the scale of the surge and bombing and seeking negotiations with North Vietnam to reduce the risk of confrontation with China and the Soviet Union, as well as to minimize U.S. losses. Having previously advised the president Johnson in favor of additional troops, McNamara had long been seen as a key influencer on U.S. policy toward Vietnam. But in 1967, he became suspicious of the war due to the increasingly pessimistic situation in Vietnam. His pessimism and skepticism about the war caused a great shock within the US government. Meanwhile, the gap between civilians advocating de-escalation and those demanding further escalation only widened. President Johnson was caught in a dilemma: if the troops num-

bers did not increase, the situation would continue to deteriorate, the war might be lost, and the United States would lose all bets that had been put on the war; on the other hand, a massive increase in troops could lead to a glimmer of victory, but it was unclear when such reinforcement could be expected to end.

In early 1968, the Spring Offensive, also known as the Tet Offensive, was launched by North Vietnam. For Johnson, this increasingly tilted the balance in favor of de-escalation of the war. On January 31, 1968, the day of the Spring Festival in the Vietnamese calendar, North Vietnam suddenly launched an attack on almost all cities in South Vietnam with nearly 100,000 troops. It was a military failure due to the disparity between the strength of the Viet Cong and the U.S. military, which caused North Vietnam heavy losses. United States intelligence estimated that by February 12, approximately 31,000 North Vietnamese troops had been killed and 5,700 captured, with 10,000 people dying from injuries and illnesses.

Still, the Tet Offensive had galvanized public opinion against the war in the United States. Senator Robert F. Kennedy came out publicly against the war, saying of the Tet Offensive: "Our enemy, savagely striking at will across all of South Vietnam, has finally shattered the mask of official illusion with which we have concealed our true circumstances even from ourselves." [6] Kennedy's view was shared by many Americans. Given the evidence that the Viet Cong could still attack anywhere at seemingly any time, reports of the war's successes and gains now rang false with the American public. A growing number of Americans believed that the war was unacceptable, and they opposed putting more American lives and money into what appeared to be a "sunk cost." In the first half of 1968 alone, over 2,000 anti-war demonstrations organized by students took place across the United States. The impact of the anti-war movement even penetrated the ranks of the American military. Many American soldiers collaborated with anti-war activists to publish and distribute underground anti-war newspapers and established coffeehouses near U.S. military bases. These coffeehouses provided soldiers with a safe space to access anti-war and counterculture literature and entertainment, hosted anti-war events, and facilitated communication among them. In Vietnam, an increasing number of U.S. soldiers lost faith in the war. Many soldiers resisted combat duties, as they no longer understood the meaning of the war.

Additionally, numerous American youths attempted to evade conscription, even going so far as to move abroad for this purpose. "Desertion rates rose to three times those seen during the Korean War, with seventeen out of every hundred soldiers going Absent-Without-Leave (AWOL) and seven deserting in 1971.…At the same time, a 1971 Pentagon study found that over half of all soldiers were engaged in some form of resistance." [10] The Assistant Secretary of the Army William Brehm wrote in a memorandum: "The Vietnam war and possibly less motivated soldiers, may increase the potential for dissidence and the number of soldiers who are responsive to anti-Vietnam groups." [11] Growing discontent with the war prompted Johnson to pursue a new strategy and a path to peace.

In a televised address in late March 1968, Johnson spoke of the United States' decision to suspend bombing parts of Vietnam in an attempt to negotiate with North Vietnam. He said:

“Tonight, I renew the offer I made last August–to stop the bombardment of North Vietnam. We ask that talks begin promptly, that they be serious talks on the substance of peace.…Tonight, I have ordered our aircraft and our naval vessels to make no attacks on North Vietnam, except in the area north of the demilitarized zone where the continuing enemy buildup directly threatens allied forward positions and where the movements of their troops and supplies are clearly related to that threat.” [12]

Hanoi responded positively on April 3 by announcing its willingness to send a delegation to meet with representatives of the United States. On May 13, the North Vietnamese and U.S. delegations held their first formal talks in Paris, ushering in a new phase of fighting and talking. The North Vietnamese insisted that the United States could only continue talking about armistice issue if it unconditionally stopped bombing. The U.S. representative insisted that the U.S. military actions in Vietnam were justified, and that the cessation of the bombing was conditional. Negotiations between the two sides reached an impasse. Over the next two months, although negotiations continued intermittently, there was no substantial progress.

With negotiations stalled, both the U.S. and North Vietnam desired to gain the initiative on the battlefield. In the spring of 1968, the intensity of U.S. air raids reached its highest level since the beginning of the Vietnam War, tripling the number of bomber sorties and dropping more than 1 million tons of bombs. North Vietnam launched the massive May Offensive against the South Vietnamese and U.S. forces to try and increase their bargaining leverage. Like the Tet Offensive, with its significant casualties endured by North Vietnam, this event underscored the North's unwavering determination to resist until the very end, leaving a lasting impression on the United States and South Vietnam. The May Offensive likewise provoked a larger wave of anti-war sentiment in the U.S., and the government had to call in troops to maintain order in the capital. Eventually, the anti-war movement in the United States, coupled with North Vietnam's determination to fight to the last man, exhausted the last of President Johnson’s patience and led to his decision to stop the bombing.

The Tet Offensive was a pivotal moment for America in the Vietnam War. It also had profound implications for President Johnson's political ambitions. With his party deeply divided over the war and facing a new presidential bid from Robert F. Kennedy, Johnson made a televised announcement that he would not seek reelection. [9] On October 3, 1968, Johnson announced the unconditional cessation of all bombing of North Vietnam, ending the escalation strategy of the war. Two months later, Republican Richard M. Nixon succeeded him as President of the United States, armed with his “secret plan” to end the Vietnam War.

5 The “Vietnamization” of the War and the American Retreat

Upon his inauguration in January 1969, Nixon faced the difficult situation where the United States was mired in the Vietnam War, as well as confronting grim domestic disturbances. The military burden brought about by the war became increasingly heavy for the United States, and its economy was also adversely affected. Anti-war movements sprang up, and the American people’s call for an end to the war grew

louder. Internationally, the Soviet Union took advantage of the war to vigorously develop its economic and military strength and narrow its power gap with the United States. Western Europe, Japan, and other regions and countries were also emerging rapidly, which changed the bipolar pattern of the US-Soviet hegemony. Under both domestic and international pressure, Nixon decided to adjust American foreign policy in an attempt to extricate the United States from the of the Vietnam War.

Nixon campaigned on a plan to get America out of the Vietnam War. Soon after taking office, Nixon launched his new Vietnam policy, also known as the Nixon Doctrine. In July 1969, Nixon delivered a speech at an informal press conference in Guam, arguing that the U.S. threat in Asia came primarily from Beijing, Pyongyang, and Hanoi. He also indicated that the United States was tackling the problems arising from the Vietnam War, and that once those problems were resolved, the country would implement a new policy towards Asia and refrain from similar wars. Reporters compiled the conversation and dubbed it the "Nixon Doctrine." In November 1969, Nixon delivered a televised speech on U.S. policy towards the Vietnam War, fully expounding the three basic principles of the Nixon Doctrine: first, the United States should assume all its obligations under existing treaties, but would not expand them unless otherwise concerning national interests of the United States; second, the United States would offer all necessary assistance to its allies which were under nuclear threat; third, the United States would not directly intervene in the form of arms and ammunition support to allies threatened by threats other than nuclear ones. The "Nixon Doctrine" was made to deal with the dilemmas caused by the Vietnam War, manifesting Nixon's plan to "Vietnamize" the Vietnam War, by which the U.S. troops would gradually withdraw from the Vietnam battlefield and eventually leave the South Vietnamese army to deal with the war itself.

In terms of its implementation, the "Vietnamization" of the war embodied two aspects: first, it was planned to improve the morale and combat effectiveness of the South Vietnamese army by improving its equipment, strengthening military training, and expanding its strength within four years, so that it could gradually assume the task of ground operations; secondly, the United States would gradually withdraw its ground troops from Vietnam, retaining only the naval and air forces to support the South Vietnamese army in combat. The proposal and implementation of the Vietnamization policy were largely due to Nixon's Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird. He believed that America's existing social and political issues, along with the staunch resistance from North Vietnam, left the United States with no choice but to gradually withdraw from Vietnam. Although Henry Kissinger had advised Nixon to escalate the war and continually criticized Laird's Vietnamization policy, Laird leveraged the domestic anti-war movement and the growing war-weariness among Congress members to persuade Nixon, ultimately convincing him to commit to the Vietnamization strategy.

With the application of this new policy, the equipment of the South Vietnamese army was significantly improved, and the number of its soldiers was also greatly expanded from 343,000 to 516,000 between 1967 and 1971. At the same time, the United States began to withdraw its troops from Vietnam. In April 1970, Nixon announced that he would withdraw 150,000 troops within a year, 60,000 of them by the

end of 1970 and another 90,000 in 1971. With the massive withdrawal of U.S. troops in Vietnam, President Nixon thought that the goal of “Vietnamization” of the war was essentially completed by the end of 1971.

Although the US withdrew its troops, it had not truly “winded down” the war. In late April of 1970, however, the United States invaded Cambodia and widened the Vietnam War. As a neighbor of Vietnam, during the reign of Prince Sihanouk, Cambodia nominally maintained neutrality but in practice, it was closer to communist regimes. Many Viet Cong members were active within Cambodian territory and the Viet Cong built supply lines and shelters along the border between Vietnam and Cambodia. In March 1970, the situation changed. Prince Sihanouk was ousted in a coup, and the pro-American leader Lon Nol took his place. However, the newly established regime was still on shaky ground, facing a significant threat from the Cambodian Communist Party. Unwilling to let this opportunity slip away, Nixon provided substantial aid to Lon Nol's government to help it combat communism. When the aid proved to be of limited effectiveness, Nixon decided to send troops into Cambodia. On April 30, thirty thousand US soldiers and fifty thousand South Vietnamese soldiers across the Cambodian border to destroy Communist bases. The Nixon administration hoped to control Cambodia to attack North Vietnam and make it surrender as soon as possible, so as to achieve the goal of "war for peace". Nixon did not really give up his intention to bring down North Vietnam by force. He once said in a conversation with his chief of staff Haldeman, "[13] I want to convince North Vietnam that I have reached the point where I will do anything to end the war." This shows that for Nixon, the most urgent and important goal was to end the war, and "Vietnamization" was just one of the means to avoid letting the Vietnam War drag down the United States. Nixon did not rule out expanding the war to bring North Vietnam to its knees.

However, the decision of the Nixon administration to send troops to Cambodia caused huge protests in the United States, and the anti-war movement represented by students swept across the country. On May 1st, protest activities erupted in university campuses nationwide, with students expressing their opposition to a wider war. Three days later, on May 4, a bloody incident occurred during the demonstration at Kent State University. four students were killed and eleven others wounded by the Ohio National Guard. Following the Kent State shootings, a wave of demonstrations and student strikes led to the closure of around five hundred colleges and universities. Protests also unfolded in Washington, DC, from May 8 to 10. Secretary of State William Rogers stated, “These student protests are greater than any of us anticipated.”

Beyond universities, the Senate also challenged Nixon's policies. On May 1, Senator Frank Church made asserted that the Nixon administration needed to "acknowledge the futility of our continued military intervention in Vietnam" and recognize "[14] the impossibility of sustaining at any acceptable cost an anticommunist regime in Saigon, allied with, dependent on, and supported by the United States." He described the situation as a "war without end." Furthermore, Church emphasized the necessity for Congress "to draw the line against an expanded American involvement in this widening war" and to take action "to put an end to it." [15] He and Senator John Sherman Cooper introduced the Cooper-Church Amendment, requiring the re-

moval of the U.S. troops from Cambodia by June 30. Facing the possibility of the passage of the Cooper-Church Amendment and the growing opposition to his policy, on May 8, 1970 Nixon announced that he would withdraw all U.S. troops in Cambodia by the end of June. Therefore, Nixon's "war for peace" plan had little effect.

After the “Vietnamization” of the war, while the United States stopped sending more troops to Vietnam, the situation in Vietnam did not improve. Despite the provision of newer equipment and the significant expansion of the army, the South Vietnamese army did not improve its combat effectiveness and instead still relied heavily on U.S. air power on the battlefield. During the “Easter” offensive launched by North Vietnam in the spring of 1972, the South Vietnamese army, supported by American air power, barely resisted the North Vietnamese attack, but both sides suffered heavy losses and the war reached a stalemate.

While promoting the “Vietnamization” policy, the Nixon administration revived negotiations with North Vietnam, which were initiated during Johnson's tenure, with one of the purposes of such efforts was to make the withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam as “dignified” as possible. In February 1970, Henry Kissinger, the national security adviser, traveled to Paris for secret talks with North Vietnamese representatives. However, the negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam did not go smoothly. The representatives of the North Vietnamese insisted on resolving the Vietnam issue both militarily and politically. In the military aspect, North Vietnam maintained that the United States and its allies should withdraw from Vietnam; while politically, North Vietnam demanded that the current South Vietnamese government step down. But since the United States would not agree to an overthrow of the South Vietnamese regime, the negotiations failed to bring any substantial progress.

In addition to the political differences between the two sides, Nixon attributed the frustrations of the United States in the war to the continuous support of China and the Soviet Union for North Vietnam. In his memoirs, Nixon argued that the key to solving Vietnam’s problems lay with Moscow and Beijing, not Hanoi, and he firmly believed that without the assistance of China and the Soviet Union, North Vietnamese leaders could not have fought beyond a few months. Against this backdrop, the ice-breaking of Sino-US relations brought about a turning point in the situation. In July 1971, Kissinger secretly went to Beijing to meet with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, indicating that the United States was willing to sacrifice Taiwan for China’s support to the United States in the U.S.-Vietnam negotiations. In the conversation, Premier Zhou repeatedly emphasized that Taiwan is an integral part of China, and that the Taiwan issue is China's internal affair, asking the United States to acknowledge China’s policies on this issue. In response, Kissinger said that the U.S. was not advocating either a “two Chinas” policy or a “one China, one Taiwan” policy, and above all the U.S. would not support the so-called Taiwan Independence Movement. Kissinger's statement on the Taiwan issue was approved by Zhou Enlai. Kissinger even suggested that after the end of the Vietnam War, the United States was prepared to withdraw two-thirds of its troops from Taiwan. Further, when they talked about Vietnam, Zhou Enlai pointed out two principles of China, namely, that the United States and its allies must withdraw their troops from Vietnam, and that the problems of In-

dochina should be decided by their own people. However, despite China's emphasis on not interfering with the US-Vietnam negotiations and its continuous urging for the US to withdraw from Vietnam, it did not seriously adhere to Hanoi's stance, nor did it issue warnings about possible military actions the US might take. During the meeting, Kissinger made it clear that even if the South Vietnamese government was overthrown after the complete withdrawal of the US troops, the United States would not interfere. However, the United States hoped to preserve its dignity by gaining more time between the withdrawal of American troops and the fall of the South Vietnamese regime.

While China and the United States settled on a deal regarding the Vietnam issue, Kissinger constantly imposed pressure on Moscow, hoping that the Soviet Union would urge North Vietnam to make concessions. Facing the easing of Sino-US relations, the Soviet Union, whose relations with China were deteriorating at that time, was very disturbed. The Soviet Union was worried that China and the United States would form an anti-Soviet alliance, and also worried that China and the United States would reach a consensus on the Vietnam issue behind the back of the Soviet Union, reducing the influence of the Soviet Union in Vietnam. Therefore, the Soviet Union also began to intervene more actively in the peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam, trying to exert influence on Vietnam.

In April 1972, the Moscow authorities, through the Soviet ambassador to North Vietnam, repeatedly advised North Vietnam’s high-level leaders, hoping that North Vietnam could reach an agreement in the negotiations with the United States. Kissinger's visit to Moscow had the opportunity to hold secret negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam, but this proposal was rejected by North Vietnam. On April 21, Kissinger arrived in Moscow and held talks with Brezhnev, further exerting pressure on the Soviet Union, saying that if the US-Vietnam peace talks broke down, the US would be unable to cooperate with the Soviet Union on other international issues due to international and domestic pressure. And if the Vietnam issue could be resolved to some extent, progress could also be made on other issues between the United States and the Soviet Union. Kissinger's warning worked. After he returned home, the Soviet Union immediately sent C. Katuchev, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the CPSU Central Committee, to visit Hanoi on April 25, and conveyed the US proposal on peace talks, saying that the United States could not tolerate a delay in peace talks in a presidential election year. If Hanoi is unwilling to reach an agreement, the United States was likely to expand the war.

Soviet intervention helped, and at the same time, with the formation of ties between the United States, China and Soviet Union (the thaw or détente period between USA and Soviet Union), North Vietnam had to reassess its current form of diplomacy. In July 1972, North Vietnam made concessions in negotiations with the United States, no longer insisting that the South Vietnamese government step down, but instead proposed to form a coalition government with North Vietnam, with equal sharing of power. It was also agreed by both sides to seek a solution to the political problem after the settlement of the military problem, that is, the withdrawal of US troops. The North Vietnamese concessions gave the United States hope for peace. Although the agreement between the United States and North Vietnam was opposed by the South

Vietnamese government, it was forced to accept the American arrangement under American threats and pressure. Finally, on January 27, 1973, the U.S. Secretary of State and the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister signed the *Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam* in Paris, marking the formal withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam and the official end of the U.S.-Vietnam War.

After the signing of the Paris Agreement, the Vietnam War temporarily entered a period of peace, during which the United States withdrew all combat troops from the battlefield in Vietnam, but still left more than 25,000 "civilian personnel" in South Vietnam. At the same time, in order to ensure the Saigon regime's survival after the withdrawal of the United States, the United States spared no effort to implement its policy of "Vietnamization" by providing equipment and ammunition for South Vietnam, hoping that it would increase its strength so as to prevent North Vietnam from breaking the treaty and launching an attack. However, the economic and military situation in South Vietnam still deteriorated. From January to May 1974, 100,000 escaped from the South Vietnamese government army. In addition, the economic situation in South Vietnam was collapsing, with corruption within the government intensifying. The South Vietnamese regime was thus crumbling. North Vietnam, on the other hand, ignored the provisions of the Paris Agreement and continued to infiltrate the south. According to U.S. intelligence, in April 1973, 35,000 North Vietnamese troops entered shelters in or near South Vietnam. However, the Nixon administration then was too busy to intervene because it was mired in the crisis of Watergate Scandal. After President Ford took over, in the face of the offensive launched by North Vietnam seeking reunification, he still tried his best to obtain assistance for South Vietnam, but the willingness of the United States Congress to intervene in Vietnam was greatly reduced, and Vietnam's reunification finally became an irreversible trend. In April 1975, when North Vietnamese troops entered Saigon, the United States finally abandoned its attempts to save South Vietnam, focusing instead on evacuating U.S. personnel in Vietnam, and April 29 marked America's complete withdrawal from Vietnam. On April 30, 1975, the North Vietnamese People's Army conquered Saigon and Vietnam was officially reunited.

6 Conclusion

U.S. policy toward Vietnam from the Johnson administration to the Nixon administration had undergone a transformation from "Americanization" to "Vietnamization." Its decision-making process had been influenced by many factors, including changes in the international political conditions, such as the intervention of the Soviet Union and China in the war, and the decline of the international status of the United States; there were also domestic factors in the United States, such as the struggle between military personnel and other officials at the top level of the government, the change in the president's foreign policy and his important staff, and the domestic anti-war movement; the transformation was, certainly, closely related to the situation in the Vietnam battlefield itself, the corruption of the South Vietnamese government and the determination of North Vietnam to fight until the completion of reunification, all of which

influenced America’s evaluation of the outcome of the war and the formulation of policy. This demonstrates that the United States' shift from "Americanization" to "Vietnamization" and eventual withdrawal from Vietnam was a complex and dynamic process. It was shaped by a variety of factors, both at home and abroad, spanning the political, economic, and diplomatic realms, and within and outside the battlefield. At its heart, the nation's interests remained the central driving force.

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