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Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam

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Map 1 Southeast Asia

Introduction

The Limits of Strategy in a Stalemated War

June 6th, 1962. At ten o'clock in the morning, President John F. Kennedy spoke to the graduating class of the United States Military Academy. Kennedy opened by noting the pride he felt in being part of the West Point tradition and, with it, the pride in being a citizen of the United States of America. He then announced his decision, as commander in chief, to remit all confinements and other cadet punishments. Surely, at least a few cadets no longer cared what their president said that morning. Indeed, JFK joked that Superintendent William C. Westmoreland must have been slightly pained to hear this news given that one cadet, who Kennedy predicted would someday head the US Army, had just watched eight months' worth of punishment miraculously expunged from his record.

The president then turned more serious, though certainly no less inspiring. He asked cadets to realize how much America depended on them, how their responsibilities would require a "versatility and an adaptability never before required in either war or in peace." Kennedy also spoke of a new type of war, "new in its intensity, yet ancient in its origin—war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him."

Kennedy acknowledged the difficulties ahead, but in 1962 little seemed outside the influence of American power. Moreover, the young president told cadets they had one satisfaction, however difficult future days may be: "When asked by any American what you are doing for your country, no one's answer will be clearer than your own. West Point . . . was built to produce officers committed to the defense of their country, leaders who understand the great stakes which are involved, leaders who can be entrusted with the heavy responsibility which modern weapons and the fight for freedom entail, leaders who can inspire the same sense of obligation to duty which you bring to it."¹

It would be nine years before another American president spoke to the Corps of Cadets in the spring of their graduating year. Those nine years would see near

unimaginable turmoil at home and abroad. A president and his brother would be assassinated, as would the most eloquent and inspirational of civil rights leaders. The war in Vietnam would expose the incapacity of American military leaders to bring about a social revolution aimed at transforming foreign political structures and cultural traditions. Antiwar protests and race riots, raging across the United States, would unmask social divisions at home. It was, to be certain, a tumultuous decade.

Nine long years after Kennedy's commencement address, Richard M. Nixon arrived at West Point to offer his own remarks to a new crop of soon-to-be army lieutenants. Nixon spoke of the long and bitter struggle in Vietnam, and even as US troops were then withdrawing from that war-torn country, he noted how Americans had "stood behind their commitment to the people of South Vietnam in the face of great temptations to turn aside." While the president saw hope for a new era of world peace, none of this, he said, was a cause for euphoria. "The harvest-time of peace is not yet," the president somberly declared.

Nixon told the cadets they could be proud of their country's power and proud of their own uniforms, yet admitted it was no secret that the "discipline, integrity, patriotism, self-sacrifice, which are the very lifeblood of an effective armed force and which the Corps represents, could no longer be taken for granted in the Army in which you would serve. The symptoms of trouble were plain enough," Nixon said, "from drug abuse to insubordination."

Compared to Kennedy's address, Nixon's speech was solemn, even ominous. Clearly, the world had changed over the previous decade. So, too, it seemed how Americans viewed themselves at the most basic of levels. Was it true, as President Nixon suggested, that the United States was still the "key-stone of peace"? Could cadets still be proud of their country's power and of their own uniforms? Did the academy's ideals of duty and honor and country still ring true?²

Both speeches, each one in a sense bookending the Vietnam conflict, suggested how a decade's worth of war had reshaped presidential narratives on the limits of American power, the role of wartime dissent, and whether the United States still had a unique role to play in global affairs. Nixon's depiction of cadets growing up in "stormy times" seemed a far cry from the soaring rhetoric of Kennedy's Camelot.³ In fact, by 1975, most Americans agreed with the tempestuous imagery Nixon had employed at West Point only four years earlier. One Catholic journal decried, "There's a lot of blood on American hands," while the *Washington Post* reported that Vietnam had "left a rancid after-taste," so much so that 72 percent of polled Americans regarded Vietnam as a "dark moment" in United States history.⁴ Had visions of American power (and possibilities) abroad changed that much between the two presidencies?

In truth, even before Nixon's resignation from office, Americans already were questioning what the Vietnam experience meant to the nation. Writing in 1970, former National Security Council staffer Chester L. Cooper argued that the "thoughtful American is still groping for reasons, explanations, assurances."⁵ The fall of Saigon in April 1975 proved especially shocking. Few could argue that with South Vietnam's collapse, the United States had not suffered an ignominious defeat in Southeast Asia. Still, Americans searched for answers. One senior military officer writing a postmortem on Vietnam hoped to "comprehend what has appeared to be an incomprehensible war." From discrediting military service to undermining Americans' faith in their government, the war had exacted a heavy price on a once proud and self-confident nation.⁶

The postwar challenge, then, became one of crafting a historical narrative that many, if not most, Americans could find palatable. In the process, tough questions needed tackling. If the United States had somehow changed between the Kennedy and Nixon presidencies, what did that mean for US presence abroad? Was the nation in decline? Its foreign policy bankrupt? Perhaps most importantly, was it possible to re-envision the Vietnam War as a noble cause in which the American armed forces had actually won the war, only to have it lost at home by those lacking the will to see a hard-fought conflict through to its rightful conclusion?⁷

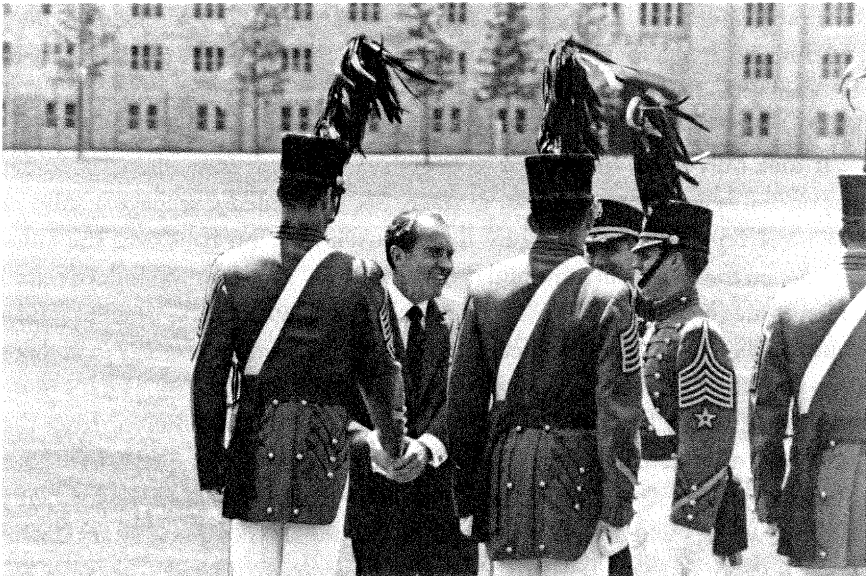


Figure 1 STORMY TIMES. President Nixon reviewing West Point cadets at a United States Military Academy parade ceremony, 29 May 1971. (WHPO Master File #6423, RNL)

A Long War's Turning Point

For those seeking answers explaining how the United States lost its first major overseas war, the 1968 Tet offensive increasingly seemed an obvious tipping point. After a year of optimistic reports emanating from the White House and the US military headquarters in Saigon—General William C. Westmoreland described 1967 as a year of “great progress”—surprise enemy attacks ranged across the entirety of South Vietnam in late January and early February.⁸ The physical destruction wrought on South Vietnamese society was immense. The psychological trauma to Americans immeasurable. Senior US policymakers expressed “grave doubts” about any further progress being made in the war effort, while correspondents opined that the “scope, the intensity and the tenacious thrust of the Communist attacks clearly caught a supposedly alerted allied command badly off balance.” Journalist David Halberstam recalled that for the American public, “the Tet offensive was a rude awakening to the toughness and resilience of the enemy, and a television preview of the long war ahead.”⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Americans focused on themselves in the aftermath of Tet, despite the devastation and social upheaval suffered by their South Vietnamese allies. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker reported in mid-February of the more than 450,000 refugees, the 48,000 homes destroyed, and the civilian deaths numbering in the thousands. Still, Americans turned inward. News editors, quite simply, found a more compelling story to be told in what appeared to be a monumental failure in US leadership. Thus, *The Wall Street Journal* could conclude in late February that the “American people should be getting ready to accept, if they haven’t already, the prospect that the whole Vietnam effort may be doomed.”¹⁰

It took only a few short steps to begin searching for someone to shoulder responsibility for such a colossal mistake. Tet demanded a scapegoat. And as *Newsweek* reported, “[T]he figure most conveniently on hand was the commander on the spot, William Childs Westmoreland.” If the war was indeed mired in stalemate (or worse), then at least one columnist argued it was time “to send a commander to Vietnam who is capable of plotting a winning strategy or, if there is no such thing, who is capable of telling the President so.”¹¹

Seeking blame for a miscarried foreign war—a war so different from the one being advertised by senior US officials—cut to deeper questions about America’s role in Southeast Asia. No doubt Westmoreland spoke for many military officers when he argued Hanoi had suffered a major military defeat in early 1968. But was Tet truly an American victory? If so, why was the US commanding general in Vietnam reportedly asking for more than 200,000 reinforcements in the offensive’s wake? Was the enemy really on the run, thus offering a “great opportunity” for those bold enough to see that victory

finally lay within the allies' grasp?¹² Or had the United States been dealt a catastrophic blow? If American military commanders had "gravely underestimated the capacity of the enemy," was it possible the war in Vietnam was now "unwinnable"? Few senior leaders, either in Washington or in Saigon, possessed satisfactory answers to any of these questions dominating the public discourse at home in mid-1968.¹³

The American-centric focus of these inquiries tended to push the Vietnamese, both allies and enemy, into the background. Yet leaders in Hanoi and Saigon equally struggled to find meaning from the battlefields of 1968. Even if the communists had not intended to drive the foreign occupiers out of South Vietnam, their goal of defeating the Americans' "aggressive will" remained difficult to assess.¹⁴ Surely, US newspapers attested to widespread discontent in American cities. But would that popular disaffection translate into policy change? While American generals might complain that "you could have marched on Hanoi and [the media] would have found some way to poor mouth you on it," such griping did not necessarily mean the United States was on the verge of withdrawing from Southeast Asia.¹⁵

Yet within the first year of Richard M. Nixon's presidency, it became clear to Hanoi, and to the rest of the world, that the United States was, in fact, leaving South Vietnam. If few Americans considered Vietnamese perspectives in the aftermath of Tet, there seemed little doubt of the United States' inability to compel Hanoi into renouncing its aims of independence and national reunification. Slowly came the realization that the long war in Asia might not be won. Tet may have been "the most disastrous defeat North Vietnam suffered in the long war," but inexplicably it didn't seem to matter.¹⁶ The new type of war about which President Kennedy warned seemingly had gotten the best of US soldiers and their civilian masters.

And thus began a decades' long search for answers, a relentless pursuit of the "truth" rivaling Old Thunder Ahab's quest for his white whale. In fact, postwar debates at times rivaled the contentiousness of the war itself. Even core questions remain disputed. Who won? Who should be blamed if the United States did lose? Did defeat in Vietnam mean the United States no longer served as the guarantor of democratic liberalism across the globe?¹⁷

In the war's aftermath, the paucity of concrete answers seemed only to heighten Americans' angst over what really happened in Vietnam. Thus, some began to seek clarity by asking new questions; in truth, counterfactuals resting more on hope than historical evidence. What if, in the aftermath of Tet, a new American general assumed command in Vietnam and, with a new strategy and determined leadership, had turned around the war effort? Might it be possible that feckless civilian policymakers began to withdraw from a war just as it was being won?

Searching for a "Better War"

Certainly, contemporary media portrayals of General Creighton Abrams endorsed such a proposition. Just two days after President Lyndon B. Johnson designated Abrams as the new commander of American forces in South Vietnam, *The Christian Science Monitor* declared in mid-April 1968 that the United States had regained "strategic momentum on battlefield." Westmoreland's deputy, pictured squinting with a stern look, had not yet officially taken over the war effort, yet miraculously had already turned it around.¹⁸

Journalists gushed over this "general with a flair." Newspaper readers learned of Abrams's daring exploits as a World War II tank commander in Patton's army, of his "Spartanly simple" approach, and of his penchant for chewing black cigars. (Had not Ulysses S. Grant similarly smoked cigars while saving the Union from disaster?) Abrams was "tough, aggressive, dynamic, spectacular."¹⁹ Even after Tet, reporters took an optimistic tone when describing the new commander of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). Whereas his West Point classmate Westmoreland looked the part of an aloof, crisp, professional soldier, Abrams impressed with his "candor, humor, self-effacement and common-sense skepticism." Moreover, in the "rumpled and somewhat burly Abrams," correspondents saw the "possibility of a significant change" in military strategy.²⁰ Thus, scaffolding was already being emplaced for construction of a myth that would endure for decades.

Abrams, in short, would fight a "better war." The story appealed in no small part because of its very simplicity. Despite setbacks in Vietnam and a growing antiwar movement at home, a new general with a better strategy had taken the reins and, through sheer will, had forced the allies back onto the path toward victory.

Abrams's herculean feat mattered because American leaders still depicted the war in Vietnam as a morally righteous crusade. National security advisor Henry Kissinger recalled "the overriding issue was how to keep faith with the tens of millions who, in reliance on American assurances, had tied their destiny to ours."²¹ President Nixon argued in September 1969 that the United States could not "accept a settlement that would arbitrarily dictate the political future of South Vietnam and deny to the people of South Vietnam the basic right to determine their own future free from outside interference."²² For Abrams to lose the war militarily meant a loss of American credibility abroad and, just as importantly, a loss of freedom for young democratic Asians opposing the aggression of global communism.

The "better war" thesis also rested on an overly reductive interpretation of American strategy under Abrams's predecessor. According to the storyline, Westmoreland's failures as a strategist obliged the allies to a wrong-headed

approach that produced only a costly stalemate. Concentrating solely on attrition of enemy forces, where body counts served as the gruesome metric of progress, Westmoreland had chosen and pursued a “search-and-destroy” strategy destined to fail. As the Tet offensive’s implications became clearer, it seemed obvious the MACV commander had been “strategically outmaneuvered.”²³ How else could it be possible the United States was failing to make progress against a Third World nation like North Vietnam? Only a mistaken strategy could explain the “smoldering stalemate” that was Vietnam. Further, Westmoreland apparently had renounced alternative strategies that would have more properly focused the allies on population security.²⁴ A clear-sighted Abrams, however, waiting patiently in the wings as MACV’s deputy, reoriented the entire command soon after taking charge. A change in strategy had broken the stalemate.

For Americans uncomfortable with the idea of a tie, especially on the battlefield, the “better war” narrative proved instantly appealing. With the war costing nearly \$2.5 billion a month, and Americans being killed at an approximate rate of 300 per week, Abrams’s ascendance to command promised a reinvigorated strategic approach—perhaps even victory.²⁵ Even if more astute observers realized that the Nixon administration no longer sought a strictly military solution in Vietnam, Abrams could at least win an “honorable peace,” of which senior officers had spoken as early as 1967. American commanders might not be able to deliver an unconditional surrender, as had their forebearers in World War II. But they could at least translate the moral commitment to South Vietnam into a tangible outcome that maintained the nation’s honor and prestige.²⁶

In short, the “better war” premise offered hope at a time when Americans were coming to the uncomfortable realization that the very definition of victory in war might be changing, and not for the better. Critics still maintained the United States was mired in an unwinnable war. The seeming reverses wrought by the Tet offensive—coupled with increasing social and political turmoil at home—shook the confidence of policy elite and general public alike.²⁷ Yet Abrams and his more enlightened approach to military strategy offered Americans a chance to redeem themselves on the battlefields of South Vietnam. If military victory lay out of reach, the general could nevertheless withdraw from Vietnam in an honorable fashion. The communists would not steal a win in the global contest of good versus evil. The South Vietnamese would remain free. And the Americans could remain proud of fighting for a noble cause.²⁸

Hence, the “better war” myth, first constructed by journalists believing they saw a major change with the ascendancy of Creighton Abrams to MACV command, became a functional device for later pundits and policymakers. For instance, the general’s reputation rose dramatically after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. With the war there unraveling as early as 2004, analysts reached back to

Vietnam for “lessons” on defeating a committed insurgency. US Army officers penned articles in professional journals like *Military Review* extolling the virtues of Abrams, while the RAND Corporation issued studies contending the general’s “understanding of the war was clearly different from his predecessor’s.”²⁹ Consequently, with Iraq on the brink of collapse in 2006, history seemed to be repeating itself. General David Petraeus, just like Abrams, took charge of a losing war at a critical moment and, with a new and enlightened strategy, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. A “better war” had once more saved the nation from humiliating defeat.³⁰

Beyond the Myth

Though the Abrams era has become a convenient historical case study for more present-minded analysts, a reassessment of the Vietnam War’s later years presents a far less triumphal narrative. Thus, the purpose of this work is to reevaluate the “better war” thesis and, more broadly, the often overlooked period of the American war in Vietnam between 1968 and 1972. Much of the new scholarship within the United States continues to focus on the inner workings of the Nixon White House (thanks to the release of the president’s Oval Office tape recordings) or how the antiwar movement embodied the angst of the post–World War II generation.³¹ Additionally, new memoirs have expanded our knowledge of the combat soldiers’ experiences, fighting at such battles like “Hamburger Hill,” or of the discontent in the ranks that led to the “fragging” of officers and senior enlisted leaders. Yet the relationship between the US military leaders in South Vietnam and the civilian policymakers in Washington, DC, remains an understudied topic.³²

Withdrawal, therefore, intends to fill a gap within the existing literature by concentrating on the senior US military command’s prosecution of the political-military conflict in Vietnam, in a sense a continuation of *Westmoreland’s War*. Far from the conventional-minded officer who cared only for racking up enemy body counts, I have argued previously, Westmoreland “developed a comprehensive military strategy consistent with the president’s larger political objectives.” In the process, the general “devised an operational plan that accorded well with the complex realities of the Vietnamese revolutionary war.”³³

In conjunction with the main arguments made in *Westmoreland’s War*, this work challenges the long-standing, and overly reductive, proposition that American strategy in Vietnam changed abruptly in mid-1968 from “search and destroy” to “clear and hold.”³⁴ Reassessing the historical record suggests the transition between Westmoreland and Abrams yielded no such categorical breaks. The lure of the “better war” narrative, however, remains strong. Thus, in his

recent study of American generalship, journalist Thomas E. Ricks could argue “there were more continuities between Westmoreland and Abrams than not,” while still affirming that “Abrams put aside Westmoreland’s strategy of attrition.” Counterinsurgency advocate John Nagl offered an equally contradictory view. Nagl maintained, “Abrams completely changed the emphasis of MACV strategy,” only to state shortly thereafter that the general “was unable to change the strategy of the U.S. Army.”³⁵ It seemed as if contesting the narrative was just too bitter a pill. Myths, of course, have a way of enduring in the popular mindset.

A reassessment contesting these myths is long overdue. At its core, then, *Withdrawal* argues that General Creighton Abrams, and the entire US mission in South Vietnam, were unable to reverse, or even arrest, the downward trends of a complicated Vietnamese war that by 1968 had turned into a political-military stalemate. Despite a new articulation of MACV strategy, Abrams’s “one war” approach could not materially alter a war that American political leaders no longer saw as vital to US national security or global dominance. In short, the bloody stalemate in Vietnam persisted during the Abrams years. Moreover, though the war expanded outside of South Vietnam’s borders (in part because of this stalemate), the Vietnamese conflict became tangential to larger US national security needs. Surely, Abrams adapted to these changing circumstances. But the slight tactical alterations ultimately mattered little. Once the Nixon White House made the political decision to withdraw from Southeast Asia, MACV’s military strategy was unable to change either the course or the outcome of a decades’ long Vietnamese civil war.³⁶

This work further argues that the “better war” thesis overextends reality. The myth’s narrative assumes that military strategy crafted in Saigon could overcome political decisions made in Washington. It could not. Even with over a half-million US troops in Vietnam by 1968, continued fighting there seemed unlikely to attain larger foreign policy objectives.³⁷ Abrams quite simply could not save a war that at least some US political leaders already had decided was lost—at least in the traditional military sense—or was no longer worth fighting. President Nixon might still believe in the domino theory, but groused that the “real question is whether the Americans give a damn anymore.”³⁸ After years of stalemate, policymakers in Washington had finally grasped that furthering the war in Vietnam was damaging, rather than bolstering, US credibility abroad.

Perhaps most importantly, neither Abrams nor his predecessor Westmoreland could answer underlying questions about Vietnamese national identity in the modern era. In essence, the war had always revolved around this fundamental issue—what did it mean to be Vietnamese in the aftermath of European colonialism? If US military strategy could not transcend policymaking decisions in Washington, it possessed even less influence in the rural countryside and urban cities of South Vietnam where this key question would be settled. The contest

over national identity remained central to determining the war's outcome, yet Americans mattered only in that many, if not most, Vietnamese saw outside influence as inimical to their cause. Surely, countless South Vietnamese, especially army officers, viewed US involvement as crucial to sustaining the Saigon regime. Yet by the late 1960s, even under the auspices of a new commander, the American presence appeared as disruptive as it was necessary.

Reassessing the Final Years

If violence remained an integral part of MACV's approach in the years after Tet, other consistencies marked the American experience in Vietnam during the Abrams era. Thus, three themes thread their way through this work. First, political grand strategy fashioned in Washington trumped military strategy conceived and implemented in South Vietnam. Strategy, in truth, unfolds at different levels. US Army doctrine in the late 1960s made clear delineations between "national strategy" and "military strategy." While the former comprised "the long-range plan through which a nation applies its strength toward the attainment of its objective," the latter directed the "development and use of the military means" to "further national strategy through the direct or indirect application of military power."³⁹

More recent explorations into the topic have proposed that "grand strategy" supplies the "intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy."⁴⁰ Encompassing more than just military matters, grand strategy takes into account all assets of national power and authority—economic, diplomatic, social, and even moral aspects. Thus, as one specialist has observed, "'Military strategy' and 'grand strategy' are interrelated, but are by no means synonymous."⁴¹

This argument plays a crucial role when reassessing the United States' final years in Vietnam. While General Abrams held broad authority when crafting military strategy inside South Vietnam, his seemingly unconventional "one war" approach could not transcend political decisions being crafted in the White House. Whether under Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon, military strategy remained bounded by parameters set far from the battlefield.

Second, Abrams could not balance a war that was unfolding along numerous (and often competing) lines. Upon taking office, Nixon formulated a wide-ranging grand strategy aimed at achieving multiple goals—reversing the "Americanization" of the war, giving more priority to pacification, destroying enemy sanctuaries, withdrawing US troops from Vietnam, and negotiating a cease-fire and peace treaty with Hanoi and Saigon.⁴² Yet even before Nixon's inauguration, Abrams acknowledged the challenge was "to orchestrate our efforts and our resources so that our total goal can be achieved." The general

believed that all of his tasks had to be undertaken concurrently. To many critics, Westmoreland had failed, in part, because of his sequential approach aimed at defeating the enemy first before helping pacify and then build a stable South Vietnamese nation.⁴³

But Abrams's "one war" approach, while conceptually sensible, proved unrealistic in practice. The MACV commander could never find parity among the opposing imperatives of US troop withdrawals, negotiations with Hanoi, the policy of Vietnamization, and the necessity of fighting an ongoing war.⁴⁴ If the purpose of grand strategy was to "achieve equilibrium between means and ends," Nixon had given his military chief in Vietnam an unmanageable task. Even optimists enamored with Abrams conceded that one had to make "hopeful assumptions" when assessing whether or not the general could fulfill the president's wishes.⁴⁵

This crafting of grand strategic objectives outside the capacity of the military command in Vietnam speaks to the final theme in *Withdrawal*. Throughout, this work explores the interrelationships between war and society in both the United States and South Vietnam. If Abrams could not balance the war in Vietnam, at least some of that failure could be attributed to the influence of the American home front. Certainly, much care is needed here, for it is far too easy to blame the antiwar movement or a liberal news media for failures at the grand strategic level. Writing in early 1967, Arthur Schlesinger believed the "proposition that dissent in America is losing the war in Vietnam is, on existing evidence, much less a fact than an alibi."⁴⁶ Still, policy decisions and domestic matters held influence over how Abrams (and his South Vietnamese allies) approached the conflict in Southeast Asia.

Nixon and Kissinger, for instance, both lamented the pressures being exerted by an impatient home front. The president, hoping to withdraw from Vietnam while maintaining the nation's honor, complained of "this cancer eating at us at home, eating at us abroad." Kissinger equally railed against domestic groups who were pressing the United States to "withdraw unilaterally and dump" South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu.⁴⁷ Even the editor for *The Harford Courant* compared the war in late 1969 to a football game in which the United States was "winning 34-7 in the third quarter just when the game may be called and the other side declared the winner."⁴⁸

This interdependence between military strategy and the home front certainly influenced what the White House and Abrams's headquarters deemed possible as the United States began its slow departure from Vietnam. Less studied, however, has been the role of the South Vietnamese home front on the war's progress and final outcome. In a struggle among the population (and for its support), the South Vietnamese were always more than just passive actors.⁴⁹ The political elite in Saigon decided whether or not to accept recommendations emanating

from the US Embassy. Local militia and security forces often determined military and political momentum in the countryside. And, of course, the people themselves were the final arbiters in resolving the crucial question of their government's legitimacy. If the United States was winning in the third quarter, it seemed at times they were playing in a completely different stadium from their South Vietnamese allies.

Thus, even for Americans, notions of victory and defeat ultimately depended on local entities. Without question, most US military and civilian leaders in Saigon understood that South Vietnam was "in the midst of a social and political revolution."⁵⁰ They worried about sustaining popular will not only at home, but also in the Vietnamese countryside, where war-weary inhabitants might concede to communist demands and revoke their support for the Thieu government. But Americans' grasp of this revolutionary struggle reached only so deep. The complexities of the internal contest over national identity that crossed ethnic, cultural, and social boundaries too often eluded US war managers. Moreover, for officers to consider their own limited influence remained a difficult proposition. As one senior US general recalled, "It was like keeping a gyroscope spinning on this thing. You have to put a little spin on it occasionally if it runs down and wobbles."⁵¹

Clearly, though, the South Vietnamese proved much more than an inanimate spinning top in need of American energy to keep upright. In this sense, exploring the war's impact on both Vietnamese and American societies helps us reevaluate the successes and limitations of US military strategy during the Abrams era. A more holistic approach contests the popular notion that the United States won the war militarily only to lose it politically. Though Nixon later would complain that "Vietnam was lost on the political front in the United States, not on the battlefield in Southeast Asia," such verdicts tended to diminish the chaotic revolutionary struggle among the Vietnamese.⁵² Americans may have pursued an effective and stable Saigon government "like the Holy Grail," but arguing that dissent at home undermined US military accomplishments abroad misses an important point. The intersections between governmental legitimacy and political-military violence in South Vietnam never evolved as neatly as President Nixon might have hoped.⁵³

Moreover, if many Americans dissented against US foreign policy in Southeast Asia, the South Vietnamese equally judged their government of South Vietnam (GVN). Far from limp "puppets" represented in enemy propaganda, the South Vietnamese—political leaders, urban elite, and rural farmers alike—made choices that mightily influenced the course of the war. True, local leaders' decisions often "exacerbated the social disorder already generated by the war."⁵⁴ But so, too, did the presence of more than half a million foreign soldiers and civilians. And while contemporary Americans generally condemned the "sheer

incapacity of the regime we backed," introducing any form of "social revolution," as GVN leaders believed they were doing, was bound to be disruptive. In the process, even a farmer's passive acceptance of communist influence in his village proved to be a choice of great political import.⁵⁵

This larger appreciation for the relationships between war and its affected societies entails reevaluating the evidence (or lack thereof) on which "better war" narratives rest. If Abrams had, in fact, succeeded in refocusing "U.S. military strategy away from search and destroy toward population control," then why did this dramatic shift not lead to substantial increases of support for the Saigon government?⁵⁶ Why, in the aftermath of Tet, did a battered National Liberation Front (NLF)—pejoratively dubbed the "Vietcong" or "VC" by the allies—continue to retain political influence in the South Vietnamese countryside? And if Abrams spoke of a "new ball game," why did so much of the rural population see only continued suffering and devastation from a war with seemingly no end in sight?⁵⁷

In the end, a selective use of the historical record, too often ignoring the South Vietnamese voice, has helped craft a misleading story about a new, war-winning strategy in the aftermath of Tet. A more accurate portrayal, however, tells a different tale. No miraculous strategic transformations occurred in mid-1968. American officers did not suddenly gain a newfound appreciation for the war's political facets because of Abrams's rise to command. The Saigon government had not convinced the bulk of the rural population that it alone was the legitimate voice of the more than 17 million people living inside a war-torn country. And no victory had been achieved in South Vietnam, only to have irresolute American politicians, disloyal journalists, and unpatriotic antiwar demonstrators sabotage the nation's last chance to achieve peace with honor in a long, yet noble, war.⁵⁸

War as Politics

Reassessing America's final years in Vietnam requires one final recognition. War is not simply a military endeavor. Political objectives drive the decisions of policymakers, combatants, and even those civilians caught in the path of war.⁵⁹ Tet surely demonstrated the incongruity between military operations and political realities in both the United States and Vietnam. But so, too, did post-1968 battles like Hamburger Hill or the allied incursions into Cambodia and Laos. Success on the battlefield rarely translated into political cachet for either Presidents Nixon or Thieu. Nor did these military operations encourage the South Vietnamese people to fully throw their lot behind the Saigon government. Nixon surely intended MACV's military operations to create political opportunities for the

allies, such as increased leverage at the negotiating table. Yet the president and his advisors (as well as contemporary military officers) visibly grasped the all too temporary affects that military campaigns had in realizing the war's larger political aims.⁶⁰

Still, Vietnam veterans took aim at their civilian masters after South Vietnam's collapse. They railed against the "fuzzy-headed liberals" and the "great deal of pressure from Washington . . . just to turn tail and run."⁶¹ They blamed political leaders for unnecessary restrictions that undermined military effectiveness. (Wouldn't an unlimited air campaign and a call-up of the reserves, they asked, have altered the course and outcome of the war?) And they impugned policy-makers for stabbing them in the back. As one lieutenant general recalled, "We had won the war after the Tet offensive and the mini-Tet, but we weren't permitted to follow it up and actually accomplish the total defeat." Civilian oversight of the military, a constitutional imperative, seemed less important than winning the war at all costs.⁶²

Veterans equally denounced the media for cultivating dissent at home, misrepresenting military victories in Vietnam, and pressuring Washington politicians to end the war regardless of the costs to national prestige and influence. One officer protested the "irresponsible journalism" that created a "chaotic image of the US effort in Vietnam."⁶³ Another believed the communists had used "our freedom of the press to their advantage," while yet another, writing in late 1969, believed the "Cassandras have succeeded in blinding the victorious warrior who cannot see his enemy writhing on the floor in the arena." Not to be outdone, even President Nixon bemoaned how "our worst enemy seems to be the press!"⁶⁴

Of course, blaming political leaders or the media for "losing" the war in Vietnam absolved military leaders of much wrongdoing, especially if under Abrams a new strategy promised victory in Tet's aftermath. While convenient, such claims rested on half-truths at best. Nixon and Kissinger, for example, sought alternative policies not just for winning the war but also for ending it honorably. Allegations of an oppositional media have been generally overblown.⁶⁵ Perhaps most importantly, to argue that political defeatism undercut battlefield victories misinterprets a war that always was more political than military in its construct. Such arguments also misconstrue the nature of modern war itself, which is always a political act first and foremost.

In truth, a collective search for blame became part of the long healing process after America's first lost war. The search reached far and wide. If victory was betrayed in Vietnam, a host of villains could be faulted—Congress, which in Nixon's words had "proceeded to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory"; the South Vietnamese government for failing to embrace reforms endorsed by US advisors; peaceniks like Jane Fonda and the misguided journalists who gave

them a national voice; even Abrams's predecessor for bungling the war effort and squandering public support.⁶⁶

From within this search for blame arose a reimagining of the Vietnam War. Perhaps the war had been won in Vietnam as Nixon had argued. Perhaps prolonging the conflict had, in fact, demonstrated the nation's credibility by directly confronting communism, thus preventing other dominoes in Southeast Asia from falling.⁶⁷ Perhaps Ronald Reagan made sense when he claimed in August 1980 that "it's time we recognized that ours was, in truth, a noble cause." As the Republican presidential nominee declared, "We dishonored the memory of 50,000 young Americans who died in that cause when we give way to feelings of guilt as if we were doing something shameful." Was it possible the United States had won the war in Vietnam?⁶⁸

Such rhetoric found a receptive audience, particularly among military officers. This reframing of the American experience in Vietnam also bolstered claims that a major strategic shift after Tet had wrought significant gains. Though the "American people decided that Vietnam wasn't worth it," tough fighting had produced results. Nixon's decision to expand the war outside of South Vietnam's borders, long an appeal from MACV, had disrupted enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos and had a marked effect on Hanoi.⁶⁹ Even though some argued there "was no intention—no objective—of defeating North Vietnam militarily," Abrams still had led the allies to victory. No doubt many officers agreed with the argument, made in early 1970, that any "acceptance of defeat would be a matter of our own decision and not a necessity."⁷⁰

These assertions, however congenial to veterans who sacrificed so much in hopes of leaving behind a stable and independent South Vietnam, also rest on dubious evidence. Reassessing America's final years in Vietnam presents a more sober account of a struggle that left indelible scars on a number of societies. It may be true, as one British officer remarked in 1967, that the military man "will at times feel that his freedom of action is being unduly restricted by political considerations."⁷¹ But war is a product of politics and military strategy only part of any larger war. Several issues, well outside of MACV's scope, affected American policy toward Vietnam—the political acumen of Hanoi's leaders, the military effectiveness of the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front armed forces, progress in nation building made by the Saigon government, and the changing global context of the larger Cold War. Quite simply, there were limits to what military force inside South Vietnam could accomplish.⁷²

The war surely affected more than just military officers coping with the limits of US strategy. Some Americans saw in the conduct of a losing war the making of a national trauma. Nixon and Kissinger worried extensively about what Vietnam was doing to US credibility abroad. Even before war's end, the president warned that a precipitous withdrawal from Vietnam would "result in a collapse of

confidence in American leadership not only in Asia but throughout the world." Faced with the consequences, "inevitable remorse and divisive recrimination would scar our spirit as a people."⁷³ With the last American troops departed from Southeast Asia, Nixon's words seemed prophetic. One critic lamented the spectacle of defeat in Vietnam, calling it a "highly traumatic experience, since a devaluation of national identity is a loss affecting the very quality of life itself." If maintaining US credibility had replaced a free and independent South Vietnam as the war's ultimate political objective, it appeared the Americans had come up short on both counts.⁷⁴

Contentions of a war won militarily yet lost politically thus fall short of their mark. The inseparable bonds between societies and the war they were fighting came into full view during the conflict's final years. Nowhere was this more evident than in South Vietnam, an unsettled political community that buckled under the combined weight of allied and enemy military action. If armed might could buoy the Saigon government, it could not convince the people that military occupation would lead to their salvation. Nor could minor strategic alterations convert skeptics within the United States to believe their international commitments to the Saigon regime were worth the continuing sacrifice.⁷⁵

More than forty years after the fall of Saigon, it is time for those studying the Vietnam War, especially Americans, to consider an uncomfortable proposition. Only the Vietnamese could resolve the deep political and social differences around which their civil war revolved. Revisionist narratives of a war-winning strategy undone by political imprudence simply don't hold up under closer scrutiny. In the end, the best that American forces were able to achieve, whether under William Westmoreland or Creighton Abrams, was a costly military stalemate. By 1973, the final US troops withdrew from South Vietnam not as victors, but as interlopers in a war that was never theirs to win or lose.