

leaders facing a future without American ground forces. President Nixon's resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam during the Easter offensive and, for the first time, his mining of North Vietnamese ports, gave confidence to the belief that the South Vietnamese could count on U.S. air support in the years ahead. So did the intense B-52 bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, the *LINEBACKER II* raids, in December 1972. But such pressure was intended at least in part to force North Vietnam to sign an armistice. If President Thieu was encouraged by the display of U.S. military muscle, the course of negotiations in Paris could only have been a source of discouragement. The long deadlock was broken in August, when North Vietnam, in the wake of its failed Easter offensive and under pressure from the Soviet Union to find a solution, dropped an earlier demand for Thieu's removal. At the same time the United States gave up its insistence on North Vietnam's withdrawal from South Vietnam. With that agreement, the talks hastened to a conclusion. In early 1973 the United States, North and South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong signed an armistice that promised a cease-fire and national reconciliation. In fact, fighting continued; but MACV was dissolved, remaining U.S. forces withdrawn, and American military action in South Vietnam terminated. Perhaps most important of all, American advisers—still in many respects the backbone of the South Vietnamese Army's command structure—were withdrawn.

Between 1973 and 1975, South Vietnam's military security declined through a combination of old and new factors. Plagued by poor maintenance and shortages of spare parts, much of the advanced equipment provided South Vietnam's forces under Vietnamization became inoperable. A rise in fuel prices stemming from a worldwide oil crisis further restricted the South Vietnamese military's use of vehicles and aircraft. Government forces in many areas of the country were on the defensive, confined to protecting key towns and installations. Seeking to preserve its diminishing assets, the South Vietnamese Army became garrison bound and either reluctant or unable to react to a growing number of guerrilla attacks that eroded rural security. Congressionally mandated reductions in U.S. aid further reduced the delivery of spare parts, fuel, and ammunition. American military activities in Cambodia and Laos, which had continued after the cease-fire in South Vietnam went into effect, ended in 1973 when Congress cut off funds. Complaining of this austerity, President Thieu noted that he had to fight a "poor man's war." Vietnamization's legacy was that South Vietnam had to do more with less.

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In 1975 North Vietnam's leaders began planning for a new offensive, still uncertain whether the United States would resume bombing or once again intervene in the South. When their forces overran Phuoc Long Province, north of Saigon, without any American military reaction, they decided to proceed with a major offensive in the Central Highlands. Neither President Nixon, weakened by the Watergate scandal and forced to resign, nor his successor, Gerald R. Ford, was prepared to challenge Congress by resuming U.S. military activity in Southeast Asia. The will of Congress seemed to reflect the mood of an American public weary of the long and inconclusive war.

What had started as a limited offensive in the highlands now became an all-out effort to conquer South Vietnam. Thieu, desiring to

husband his military resources, decided to retreat rather than to reinforce the Central Highlands. The result was panic among his troops and a mass exodus toward the coast. As North Vietnamese forces spilled out of the Central Highlands, they cut off South Vietnamese defenders in the northern provinces from the rest of the country. (*Map 21*) Other North Vietnamese units now crossed the demilitarized zone, quickly overrunning Hue and Da Nang and signaling the collapse of South Vietnamese resistance in the north. Hurriedly established defense lines around Saigon held back the enemy offensive against the capital for a while, but not for long. As South Vietnamese leaders waited in vain for American assistance, Saigon fell to the Communists on April 30, 1975.

The time South Vietnamese forces bought near Saigon allowed the United States to complete a final evacuation from the capital. All day long on the twenty-ninth of April, Air Force and Marine Corps helicopters shuttled nearly 7,000 people, including the American ambassador, to U.S. Navy ships waiting off shore. Among the 5,600 non-American evacuees were South Vietnamese who were related to Americans or who faced a doubtful future because of the work they had done in Vietnam for U.S. agencies. Two U.S. marines were killed when North Vietnamese shells struck the compound of the former MACV headquarters that was serving as an evacuation site. Two pilots died when their helicopter went down at sea. These were the final U.S. casualties in Vietnam while the war still raged. When the last helicopter lifted off from the American embassy the next morning, taking with it a contingent of marine guards, the long American war for Vietnam came to a close.

An Assessment

Saigon's fall was a bitter end to the long American effort to sustain South Vietnam. Ranging from advice and support to direct participation in combat and involving nearly 3 million U.S. servicemen, the effort failed to stop Communist leaders from reaching their goal of unifying a divided nation. South Vietnam's military defeat tended to obscure the crucial inability of this massive military enterprise to compensate for South Vietnam's political shortcomings. Over a span of two decades, a series of regimes had failed to mobilize fully and effectively their nation's political, social, and economic resources to foster a popular base of support. North Vietnamese conventional units ended the war, but insurgency and disaffection among the people of the South made that outcome possible.

The U.S. Army paid a high price for its long involvement in South Vietnam. American military deaths exceeded 58,000; of those, about two-thirds were soldiers. The majority of the dead were low-ranking enlisted men (E-2 to E-4), young men twenty-three years old or younger, of whom approximately 13 percent were African American. Almost a third of the deaths were caused by small-arms fire; but a significant portion, a little over a quarter, stemmed from mines, booby traps, and grenades. Artillery, rockets, and bombs accounted for only a small portion of the total fatalities. The deadliest year was 1968, followed by 1969 and 1967.

*Map 21*

If not for the unprecedented medical care that the Army provided in South Vietnam, the death toll would have been higher still. Of the nearly 300,000 Americans wounded, half required hospitalization. The lives of many seriously injured men, who would have become fatalities in earlier wars, were saved by rapid helicopter evacuation direct to hospitals close to the combat zone. Here, relatively secure from air and ground attack, usually unencumbered by mass casualties, and with access to an uninterrupted supply of whole blood, Army doctors and nurses availed themselves of the latest medical technology to save thousands of lives. As one medical officer pointed out, the Army was able to adopt a “civilian philosophy of casualty triage” in the battle zone that directed the “major effort first to the most seriously injured.” But some who served in South Vietnam suffered more insidious damage from the adverse psychological effects of combat or the long-term effects of exposure to chemical agents. Moreover, three decades after the end of the war, almost 1,900 American soldiers remain listed as missing in action.

The war-ravaged Vietnamese, North and South, suffered the greatest losses. South Vietnamese military deaths exceeded 200,000. War-related civilian deaths in the South approached a half-million, while the injured and maimed numbered many more. Accurate estimates of enemy casualties run afoul of the difficulty in distinguishing between civilians and combatants, imprecise body counts, and the difficulty of verifying casualties in enemy-controlled areas. Nevertheless, nearly a million Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers are believed to have perished in combat through the spring of 1975.

For the U.S. Army the scars of the war ran even deeper than the grim statistics showed. Given its long association with South Vietnam's fortunes, the Army could not escape being tarnished by its ally's fall. The loss compounded already unsettling questions about the Army's role in Southeast Asia, about the soundness of its advice to the South Vietnamese, about its understanding of the nature of the war, about the appropriateness of its strategy and tactics, and about the adequacy of the counsel Army leaders provided to our nation's decision makers. Marked by ambiguous military objectives and defensive strategy, sometimes ponderous tactics, and untidy command arrangements, the struggle in Vietnam seemed to violate most of the time-honored principles of war. Many officers sought to erase Vietnam from the Army's corporate memory, feeling uncomfortable with failure or believing that the lessons and experience of the war were of little use to the post-Vietnam Army. Although a generation of officers, including many of the Army's future leaders, cut their combat teeth in Vietnam, many regretted that the Army's reputation, integrity, and professionalism had been tainted in the service of a flawed strategy and a dubious ally.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Tet offensive was a desperate gamble on the part of the North Vietnamese leadership and a sign of military weakness: true or false? Why?
2. What were the main elements of the pacification program in Vietnam, and how did the program change over time?