

Vietnamization: President Nixon and the End of the Vietnam War

Background: Nixon won the 1968 election with his campaign for ending the Vietnam War with an honorable peace. The pace of the administration's end of the war continued to spur demonstrations including the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam in October of 1969. Nixon delivered an address to the nation now referred to as "The Silent Majority Speech" on November 3, 1969. Nixon laid out a plan for the end of the war through the process of diplomatic negotiation and Vietnamization. At the close of the speech, he requested the support of the "great silent majority" for his plans. Nixon's speech was enormously successful resulting in tens of thousands of letters and telegrams of support. Not only did the speech affect the war and Nixon presidency but also it promoted a political opportunity in the Republican Party to amass a New Majority and promote conservative policies. Others disagreed with the president, and voiced their opposition in letters and further demonstrations including another Moratorium later in November 1969.

Read the excerpt and with your group, answer the questions that follow.

The defense of freedom is everybody's business--not just America's business. And it is particularly the responsibility of the people whose freedom is threatened. In the previous administration, we Americanized the war in Vietnam. In this administration, we are Vietnamizing the search for peace.

The policy of the previous administration not only resulted in our assuming the primary responsibility for fighting the war, but even more significantly did not adequately stress the goal of strengthening the South Vietnamese so that they could defend themselves when we left.

The Vietnamization plan was launched following Secretary Laird's visit to Vietnam in March. Under the plan, I ordered first a substantial increase in the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces. In July, on my visit to Vietnam, I changed General Abrams' orders so that they were consistent with the objectives of our new policies. Under the new orders, the primary mission of our troops is to enable the South Vietnamese forces to assume the full responsibility for the security of South Vietnam....

1. What does Nixon mean by "we Americanized the war in Vietnam"?

2. What was Nixon's plan for Vietnam?

We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. combat ground forces, and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable. This withdrawal will be made from strength and not from weakness. As South Vietnamese forces become stronger, the rate of American withdrawal can become greater.

I have not and do not intend to announce the timetable for our program....

3. What was Vietnamization??

4. Why do you think Nixon does not want to put a date on when American withdrawal will happen?

My fellow Americans, I am sure you can recognize from what I have said that we really only have two choices open to us if we want to end this war. I can order an immediate, precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without regard to the effects of that action. Or we can persist in our search for a just peace through a negotiated settlement if possible, or through continued implementation of our plan for Vietnamization if necessary--a plan in which we will withdraw all of our forces from Vietnam on a schedule in accordance with our program, as the South Vietnamese become strong enough to defend their own freedom. I have chosen this second course. It is not the easy way. It is the right way.

It is a plan which will end the war and serve the cause of peace--not just in Vietnam but in the Pacific and in the world.

In speaking of the consequences of a precipitate withdrawal, I mentioned that our allies would lose confidence in America.

Far more dangerous, we would lose confidence in ourselves. Oh, the immediate reaction would be a sense of relief that our men were coming home. But as we saw the consequences of what we had done, inevitable remorse and divisive recrimination would scar our spirit as a people.

We have faced other crises in our history and have become stronger by rejecting the easy way out and taking the right way in meeting our challenges. Our greatness as a nation has been our capacity to do what had to be done when we knew our course was right.

I recognize that some of my fellow citizens disagree with the plan for peace I have chosen. Honest and patriotic Americans have reached different conclusions as to how peace should be achieved.

In San Francisco a few weeks ago, I saw demonstrators carrying signs reading: "Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home."

Well, one of the strengths of our free society is that any American has a right to reach that conclusion and to advocate that point of view. But as President of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this Nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.

For almost 200 years, the policy of this Nation has been made under our Constitution by those leaders in the Congress and the White House elected by all of the people. If a vocal minority, however fervent its cause, prevails over reason and the will of the majority, this Nation has no future as a free society.

And now I would like to address a word, if I may, to the young people of this Nation who are particularly concerned, and I understand why they are concerned, about this war.

I respect your idealism. I share your concern for peace. I want peace as much as you do. There are powerful personal reasons I want to end this war. This week I will have to sign 83 letters to mothers, fathers, wives, and loved ones of men who have given their lives for America in Vietnam. It is very little satisfaction to me that this is only one-third as many letters as I signed the first week in office. There is nothing I want more than to see the day come when I do not have to write any of those letters.

I want to end the war to save the lives of those brave young men in Vietnam. But I want to end it in a way which will increase the chance that their younger brothers and their sons will not have to fight in some future Vietnam someplace in the world. And I want to end the war for another reason. I want to end it so that the energy and dedication of you, our young people, now too often directed into bitter hatred against those responsible for the war, can be turned to the great challenges of peace, a better life for all Americans, a better life for all people on this earth.

5. Why did President Nixon believe that Vietnamization was the best plan for the nation in 1969?

6. How did President Nixon answer critics who he anticipated would oppose his plan?

And so tonight—to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support.

I pledged in my campaign for the Presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge.

The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate in Paris.

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.

7. Who is the “silent majority”?

8. Based on what you have learned about the war in Vietnam and the broader Cold War, do you think Nixon’s plan for Vietnamization was a continuation of the governmental policy of containment or something totally different? Explain.

END OF THE WAR TIMELINE

November 1968	Nixon elected president promising to restore “law and order” and to end the draft
September 1969	Ho Chi Minh dies of a heart attack in Hanoi
1969 – 1972	Nixon administration gradually reduces the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam from a peak of 549,000 in 1969 to 69,000 in 1972
February 1970	U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger begins secret negotiations in Paris
March – May 1970	series of secret bombings targeted communist support in Cambodia and Laos
April – June 1970	U.S. and South Vietnamese forces attack across the Cambodian border
May 1970	Kent State Shooting = National Guard troops fire on student protestors
June 1971	New York Times publishes a series of articles known as the “Pentagon Papers”
January 1973	End of the draft
January 1973	President Nixon signs the Paris Peace Accords
August 1974	President Nixon resigns amid the Watergate Scandal
April 1975	The Fall of Saigon = North Vietnamese forces overrun the capital of South Vietnam
July 1975	North and South Vietnam are formally unified under communist rule