Vietnamization

General Creighton Abrams, who replaced General Westmoreland as U.S. Commander in Vietnam in 1968, had very different ideas about how to fight the war. He called a halt to Westmoreland’s large-scale search and destroy missions. General Abrams’ aim was to clear and hold the countryside. To do this, he used small patrols whose role was to cut the Viet Cong and NVA off from the people while providing security for the population.

General Abrams believed in Vietnamization, which was the policy to hand over the fighting of the war to the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). He built up the ARVN in several ways. The ARVN received more military training, were given modern weapons, and they were used more often in combined missions with the U.S. military.

On November 5, 1968, President Richard Nixon was elected. During the presidential election, Nixon hinted he had a secret plan to end the war and said he would bring peace with honor. This meant preserving the South Vietnamese government without the support of U.S. troops. The difficulty of achieving this goal led to four more years of warfare. In 1969, President Nixon announced the first reductions in U.S. troop levels – 25,000 in June followed by 60,000 in December. At the same time, he increased funding for the ARVN, which grew in size from 427,000 men, in 1968, to 516,000 in 1971. President Nixon said, “We linked the pace of our withdrawal to the progress of Vietnamization...As South Vietnamese forces became stronger, the rate of American withdrawal could become stronger.”

1. What is Vietnamization?

2. Explain why you do or don’t support Vietnamization.

3. What did President Nixon mean when he said he would bring peace with honor?
Cambodia

One major problem that U.S. forces faced was that the Viet Cong and NVA had set up bases in the neutral country of Cambodia, which together with Laos and Vietnam made up Indochina. Cambodia’s Prince Sihanouk (right) had tolerated the presence of the Vietnamese bases. By doing this, Viet Cong and NVA soldiers could attack U.S. forces and then retreat across the border back into Cambodia. Because Cambodia was neutral, U.S. troops couldn’t pursue their enemy into Cambodia. This posed a major problem. Two months after becoming president, Nixon widened the war by ordering the bombing of Cambodia in order to hit the NVA system of base camps. Nixon kept the bombing secret from Congress and American journalists. Eventually, Cambodia’s Prince Sihanouk was overthrown by Lon Nol, an anti-communist general. Lon Nol ordered the North Vietnamese to leave Cambodia but they launched an offensive against Lon Nol’s government. To save Lon Nol, Nixon gave orders for a joint U.S. and ARVN invasion of Cambodia. In April, 30,000 U.S. and 50,000 ARVN troops swept into Cambodia, driving the Vietnamese back and destroying much of the NVA base system. Despite this military success, Congress, reacting to the invasion of a neutral county, passed a measure forbidding the use of U.S. ground troops in Cambodia and Laos.

1. What advantage did the bases in Cambodia give the Viet Cong and NVA over U.S. troops?

2. What did the invasion of Cambodia achieve?

3. What did the U.S. Congress do?
Laos

After U.S. and ARVN troops invaded Cambodia, the North Vietnamese relied more on their bases in Laos. But because Congress had made it illegal to use American ground troops in Cambodia and Laos, the invasion of Laos would be left to the South Vietnamese ARVN. Could South Vietnam defeat the communists on their own? The invasion of Laos would be a test of whether the process of *Vietnamization* was successful.

On February 8, 21,000 ARVN troops advanced into Laos, where they found 36,000 NVA, equipped with new Soviet tanks, waiting for them. After fierce fighting, the South Vietnamese retreated. They lost half their men, and the survivors only got back thanks to air support and U.S. helicopters that carried them to safety.

One reporter said, “The NVA drove the invading forces out of Laos with their tail between their legs...Troops desperate to escape mobbed many of the rescuing helicopters, forcing crewmen to throw them off bodily (throw them off the helicopters).”

1. What did the South Vietnamese ARVN find waiting for them in Laos?

2. **Explain** what happened in the invasion.
Peace with Honor

In January 1969, peace talks began in Paris between the U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the National Liberation Front. Besides these public peace talks, there were also secret meetings between the North Vietnamese and President Nixon’s national security advisor, Henry Kissinger but no progress was made. North Vietnam terms were firm. They insisted on the complete withdrawal of U.S troops and the removal of South Vietnam’s government.

In trying to achieve peace with honor, President Nixon’s biggest problem was getting North Vietnam to agree to leave the government in South Vietnam in power. He thought he could do this in several ways. First, he began putting pressure on Hanoi in North Vietnam by escalating the air war, with the bombing of Cambodia and North Vietnam.

Secondly, President Nixon used what he called the madman approach. This was an attempt to scare communist North Vietnam into believing that he would use nuclear weapons. President Nixon told an aide, “I call it the madman theory. I want the North Vietnamese to believe that I’ve reached the point that I might do anything to stop the war. We’ll just slip the word to them that for God’s sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can’t restrain him when he’s angry, and he has his hand on the nuclear button, and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace.” As part of his madman tactic, in October 1969 President Nixon sent eighteen B-52s armed with nuclear weapons to fly toward the Soviet Union.

Another way to gain leverage for peace talks was to improve U.S. relations with the countries supporting North Vietnam - China and the Soviet Union. President Nixon visited China in 1972 and Chinese Chairman Mao saw the U.S. as a possible ally. While in China, President Nixon realized that relations weren’t great between China and the Soviets. Soviet leaders became nervous when Nixon met with Mao and worked at improving their relations with the U.S. as well.

Finally, President Nixon believed the anti-war movement in the U.S. damaged his attempts to get North Vietnam to negotiate peace. On November 3, 1969, he made a television address in which he appealed for backing from the silent majority (those who supported the war but remained quiet). He told them, “The more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate...North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.”

1. What were North Vietnam’s terms for peace?
2. What is the “madman” approach?

3. What did President Nixon mean when he said, “...North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.”

4. What are the four (4) ways that President Nixon tried achieve “peace with honor” by getting North Vietnam to agree to leave the government in South Vietnam in power.
   
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5. Pick the one strategy out of the four you think is the most effective and explain why.
The “Easter Offensive” and “Operation Linebacker”

President Nixon hoped that his visit with Chairman Mao in China would encourage North Vietnam to negotiate. Instead, during Easter 1972, North Vietnam launched a massive new offensive, sending 200,000 NVA troops into South Vietnam. North Vietnamese General Giap gambled on success because so many U.S. ground troops had already been withdrawn from Vietnam. Nixon’s response to the Easter Offensive was his biggest bombing campaign yet. It was aimed at both the invading NVA and the cities of North Vietnam. The campaign, called Operation Linebacker, used hundreds of bombers and fighter-bombers to wreak havoc on North Vietnam. Nixon told his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, “We will bomb the living bejeezus out of North Vietnam and then if anybody interferes we will threaten the nuclear weapons.”

1. Why did General Giap think the Easter Offensive would be successful?

2. If you were in the Oval Office during President Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s conversation, what would you have said? **Explain** why you said what you said.