

## Nixon's "Peace with Honor"

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Richard Nixon ran for president in 1968 claiming to have a "plan to end the war" and pledging that his "end to the war" would be an "honorable". Shortly after his January 1969 inauguration, he announced his policy of "Vietnamization", i.e., withdrawing American troops and turning over the fighting to the Army of South Vietnamese, the "ARVN". In addition, since public peace talks begun in Paris between the U.S. and North Vietnam during the Johnson Administration had proved to be more a theater for propaganda than a road to peace, Nixon approved secret negotiations with North Vietnam. These talks, which commenced in August 1969, were conducted by Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, and Vietnam's Le Duc Tho, Head of the Central Commission of the North Vietnamese Communist Party.

Although the North Vietnamese had proved to be indomitable in the face of massive U.S. military pressure and Vietnamization could only serve to reduce that pressure, Nixon's "plan" seemed to envision preserving the independence of South Vietnam by escalating the bombing of North Vietnam even as U.S. troop strength inexorably declined. Early on in the Paris talks, Le Duc Tho saw the fatal flaw in the Nixon plan:

Before there were over a million US and puppet troops and you failed. How can you succeed when you let only the puppet troops do the fighting? Now with only US support, how can you win?

*Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 116

As the peace talks, both secret and public, dragged on and the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam ineluctably diminished, the Nixon Administration turned up the military pressure by sending troops into Cambodia and increasing the bombing of North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. These attempts to force North Vietnam to moderate its position were unsuccessful.

In April 1971, Nixon tried to explain why, with a deadline set for their total withdrawal, U.S. troops were still being killed and wounded in Vietnam:

Shall we leave Vietnam in a way that - - by our own actions - - consciously turns the country over to the Communists? Or shall we leave in a way that gives the South Vietnamese a reasonable chance of survival?

*Ending the Vietnam War*, p. 207

Nixon's language speaks volumes - - the goal of U.S. policy had been reduced from preserving South Vietnam's independence to affording them "a reasonable chance of survival." But both Nixon and Kissinger knew, as surely as did Le Duc Tho, the Saigon government had no chance of survival without U.S. boots on the ground. What Nixon was actually seeking was a "decent interval" between the complete draw down of U.S. troops and the fall of South Vietnam to the Communists.

In late 1972, the U.S. agreed to a "cease-fire in place", meaning that the troops North Vietnam had already deployed in South Vietnam could stay there. Nguyen Van Thieu,

the President of South Vietnam, knowing this was the death knell for his country, resisted these terms for a time, but eventually accepted them - - he had little choice. In January 1973, Nixon declared the U.S. had achieved "peace with honor" by agreeing to the Paris Peace Accord, which was intended to end the war. But, despite the Accord, fighting continued and with no U.S. ground troops supporting the Saigon government and then with Congress cutting off American military support of any kind, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops on April 30, 1975. .

Of the 58,220 U.S. deaths in the Vietnamese War, 21,270 or 36.5% took place after Nixon took office. The number of U.S. wounded in that period was 110,960. ARVN soldiers, South Vietnamese civilians, Viet Cong, North Vietnamese army personnel, and civilians in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia continued to be killed in great numbers throughout this timeframe.

Whether an "interval" of two and a quarter years between the announcement of "peace with honor" and the fall of South Vietnam was "decent" enough for the United States to save face seems doubtful. Equally questionable was the Nixon Administration's accepting, for the sake of "national honor", the deaths of thousands and thousands in a cause it knew to be hopeless.

The 1973 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. Kissinger accepted the prize; Le Duc Tho declined.