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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

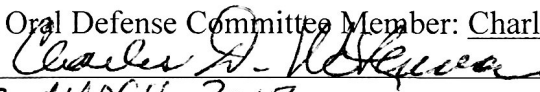
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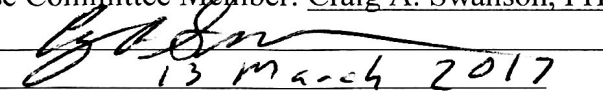
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Executive Summary

Title: Vietnamization, Airpower, and Forgetting History in Iraq

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Thesis: The United States became overly reliant on airpower in Vietnam in order to execute the Vietnamization program and withdraw and we are repeating many of the same mistakes in Iraq that led to South Vietnam's ultimate defeat.

Discussion: After Richard Nixon was elected, he attempted to fulfill his promise of peace with honor in Vietnam through a strategy entitled Vietnamization. The goal was to replace American forces with South Vietnamese that were trained, equipped, advised, and supported by the United States (US) until they were capable of defending their nation. Operations in Cambodia during 1970 and the Easter offensive of 1972 convinced the United States it could accelerate its withdraw but the failed Lam Son operation of 1971 exposed critical flaws that indicated the reality of South Vietnamese military capabilities and their likely fate when US advisors were gone. In Iraq, sectarianism and corruption withered the Iraqi military left behind after the United States withdraw in 2011. The remaining force, trained for counter insurgency, collapsed under the sophisticated conventional threat of the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. The United States' efforts since re-engagement in late 2014 have followed in the footsteps of the Vietnamization program. The United States has not utilized its own front line combat forces but has again focused on training, equipping, advising, and supporting Iraqi military forces. The campaign to retake Tikrit, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul have all shown parallels to mistakes made in the later years of Vietnam, in particular the over-reliance on US airpower for tactical successes.

Conclusion: While the defeat of the IS in Iraq is likely, the US' choice to use its overwhelming airpower advantage to facilitate tactical successes for Iraqi military units is creating a force that will not be able to hold up against the next threat without continued US and international support.

On August 8th 1968, Richard Nixon accepted the Republican presidential nomination in Miami Beach, Florida. In his speech, the first major policy objective he discussed was the ongoing war in Vietnam. He argued that if the Johnson administration could not secure peace in Vietnam with the full force of the American economy and Military, then the strategy itself must be flawed and the people executing it should be removed. He then pledged that his first foreign policy objective was to achieve an honorable end to the war.¹ The war weariness of the American populace, along with the pledge to end the war were crucial ingredients in Nixon's successful election. After taking office, however, Nixon quickly realized how difficult it would be to extricate the United States (US) from the conflict. The administration realized that the only way US forces could return home was if Vietnamese forces were able to defend South Vietnam on their own. The strategy put in place was referred to as Vietnamization. In it the US would train, equip, and supply logistical and fire support to the Vietnamese armed forces and as they gained capability, would withdrawal its own combat forces. These efforts were put to a serious test during the 1972 Easter Offensive around the city of An Loc. Using overwhelming airpower, under the direction of US forward air controllers and advisors, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) were able to withstand a 66 day long conventional combined arms attack by regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces. The victory was heralded as a vindication of the Vietnamization policy and allowed the US to complete its withdrawal from Vietnam without sufficiently preparing the South Vietnamese to assume their own defense. This paper seeks to examine the history of Vietnamization as it pertains to the lead up and aftermath of the 1972 Battle of An Loc and suggest to what extent the US may be repeating errors that led to the collapse of South Vietnam, specifically the over reliance on US advisors and airpower, in its

prosecution of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Vietnamization

Upon assuming the office of the president, Nixon began searching for a strategy to end the Vietnam War. He issued, on his first full day in office, National Security Study Memorandum 1 (NSSM 1). NSSM 1 was a six page, single spaced questionnaire on the situation in Vietnam with 79 questions he wanted answered by various organizations ranging from the Department of Defense (DOD) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to the Department of State (DOS) and US Embassy in Saigon.² The responses to NSSM 1 were contradictory and varied in their conclusions, showing no consensus on how good or bad things actually were or the best way forward. Retired LtGen Phillip Davidson suggests the point of NSSM 1 was entirely to draw out this lack of consensus and not to really acquire any new information. He suggests that Dr. Henry Kissinger could use one department's response to nullify another and based on the fact that it was unclear who was wrong, the White House could then ignore them all, allowing control of foreign and military policy not from the bureaucracy but from the White House itself.³ After laying the foundation to make all major policy decisions, Nixon sent Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to Saigon to obtain a better assessment of ground truth. Laird, being a former Republican Congressman, was an astute politician and knew that Nixon would have a limited grace period with the public to accomplish meaningful action on Vietnam before their dissent and protest would again rise. In a memorandum on 13 March 1969, Laird laid out a plan which conflicted with advice and warnings given from Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) commander General Creighton Abrams that the Vietnamese could never stand on their

own against a combined threat from both Viet Cong and NVA. The plan was that the war would be turned over to the ARVN, US forces would transition to an advisory role in which their mission would be to train the ARVN and not seek to directly defeat the enemy in combat, and that US withdrawals could be accomplished without equal withdrawals of North Vietnamese forces due to the increased abilities of the ARVN.⁴ Nixon's closest advisors presented him with two main options. Secretary Laird championed the full implementation of "Vietnamization", while Kissinger argued that negotiations and leveraging improving relations with the Soviet Union and China to force North Vietnam to resume peace talks would be a better route to lasting peace. Ultimately Nixon chose Vietnamization as the primary strategy of achieving peace with honor based on Laird's enthusiastic advocacy while continuing back channel talks in Paris in the hopes that various military operations would force the North to accept US demands and withdrawal.⁵

For the next several months, MACV attempted to modernize, train, and equip the ARVN and increase efforts in its pacification program while Kissinger continued attempts to resume negotiations in Paris. The North Vietnamese, however, believed that they could wait out the US and that they had the momentum due to the backlash of the American populace regarding the 1968 Tet Offensive. As 1969 came to a close, Nixon had lost the good will afforded a new administration. New hearings into the lack of progress were called for in Congress and massive protests were scheduled for Oct 15 and every following 15th. Nixon outlined his plans to the American populace in a televised speech on 3 Nov. In the speech, Nixon first recounted how the US had gotten involved in the war and actions of all the presidents before him. He argued that unilateral full withdrawal would do irrevocable damage to the US in world affairs and leave the populace of South Vietnam open to the barbarity displayed after the taking of Hue city in 1968.

He blamed the failure of negotiations squarely on the North Vietnamese who, he said, demanded surrender. He then turned to outline the “Nixon doctrine”, the centerpiece of which was Vietnamization. He stated, “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.”⁶ And so, with the speech Nixon announced publicly that the US was no longer attempting to win the Vietnam War, but was seeking to withdraw with some amount of honor and international credibility intact and with a South Vietnamese military that could hold its own, for some indefinite period of time.

Vietnam

The weather in South Vietnam is divided into two seasons, a wet monsoon season, and a relatively dry season. The monsoon season runs from roughly May through November and during this time rivers, roads, fields, and streams become logistical hurdles due to the mud, heavy rain, and fog limited visibility. The Politburo of the communist government of North Vietnam often held their yearly party congresses between August and September where they decided the strategy for the following year's “fighting season.” The majority of large scale operations took place between December and May when the weather was more favorable with the rest of the year consisting of logistical preparation and more limited intensity operations. After the Tet offensive failed militarily, the North Vietnamese issued Resolutions 9 and 14 in the middle of 1969. Resolution 9 was a critical self-examination of the Tet Offensive and Resolution 14 was a directive to de-emphasize main force warfare and return to guerrilla tactics

by local fighters. The North Vietnamese strategy was to wait out the Nixon government and keep pressure on the South via harassing attacks.⁷

In March of 1969 and lasting well into 1970, Nixon authorized secret B-52 bombing strikes within Cambodia near the border with South Vietnam. These strikes were requested by General Abrams and directed on logistical bases used to support NVA and Viet Cong offensives into South Vietnam. Nixon was frustrated by the North's refusal to return to the negotiating table and was encountering increased domestic resistance. According to his memoirs, he needed a "display of force to show the enemy that we were still serious about our commitment in Vietnam," while troop withdrawals continued and the NVA watched and waited.⁸

In February of 1970 the ruler of Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk, discarded a previous stance of neutrality and announced the NVA were in Cambodia and he wanted them removed. While the prince visited Paris in March to attempt to negotiate the withdrawal, a bloodless coup led to anti-communist Prime Minister Lon Nol seizing power. The NVA reacted by forcibly occupying the Cambodian border with South Vietnam and advancing on the capitol of Phnom Penh against woefully unprepared Cambodian forces.⁹ At the time of the coup there were anywhere from 40 to 60,000 NVA troops in Cambodia. The Nixon administration and MACV leadership knew that Vietnamization was threatened by such a large force poised only 35 miles from the South Vietnamese capitol of Saigon. For Vietnamization to succeed, reducing the cross border threat from Cambodia and Laos would give necessary time and breathing room for the Vietnamese to train, expand, and assume responsibility for their own defense. Nixon announced the beginning of military operations inside Cambodia by American and South Vietnamese units to the American public on 30 April, 1970. In the speech, he explained the reasoning for the expansion of the war effort while emphasizing that operations would be temporary and of short duration.

He highlighted that the South Vietnamese would be in the lead in the area closest to Saigon known as the Parrot's Beak and briefly mentioned a combined operation farther north at a place referred to as the Fish Hook. Finally, he acknowledged not only the political costs that his decision would likely have for his party, which was facing mid-term elections, but on himself. He stated that, "I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe was right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and...accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history."¹⁰

While he was giving delivering his speech, operations had already commenced in Cambodia, led by B-52 and tactical air strikes. A South Vietnamese force supported by US advisors attacked into the Parrot's Beak while a combined US and ARVN force attacked the Fish Hook. The NVA rear guard put up a fight for first two days allowing the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) leadership and remainder of forces to relocate further west. While the North Vietnamese leadership was not defeated, the damage to their logistical capability to execute operations in South Vietnam was great. Along with 11,000 killed and 2,500 captured, the NVA lost 23 thousand small arms, 2,500 crew served weapons, 16.7 million rounds of small arms ammunition, 143 thousand mortar and rocket rounds, 435 vehicles, as well as 14 million pounds of rice.¹¹ In addition to the destruction of its base areas, the NVA also lost access to the Cambodian port at Sihanoukville which it had previously used as the main overland logistical route to supply forces in South Vietnam. Henry Kissinger believed the operations set the communists back at least 15 months, while Sir Robert Thompson believed it could have been up to two years.¹² The operations allowed Nixon to claim Vietnamization was working, took pressure off of South Vietnam allowing it more time to develop its forces, and allowed Nixon to continue his scheduled troop withdrawals.

Despite the military success, the incursion was widely viewed as a widening of the war in the US and abroad. Approximately 4.5 million US students held protests and strikes at 57 percent of the country's universities including Kent State and Jackson State and over 100 thousand Americans marched on Washington D.C.¹³ In addition to the public outcry, Congress rescinded the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and made a first attempt to pass the Cooper Church Amendment, which would have prohibited the use of funds for any US ground operations in Cambodia.¹⁴

While the performance of the ARVN was generally good and their morale soared, lingering issues and problems were also noted. The ARVN troops were for the most part from the more elite units, such as the armored cavalry or rangers, and they were fighting against a rear guard that withdrew after initial engagements. The ARVN had problems providing their own artillery support and even when they received US artillery support, could not adjust rounds effectively. Their lack of ability forced them to rely heavily on tactical air support as a result. Many tanks and vehicles broke down or ran out of fuel due to lack of logistical planning and capacity. Leadership wise, ARVN LtGen Do Cao Tri bypassed the politically appointed division commanders and task organized forces directly at the Colonel level and below.¹⁵ All of these problems could be fixed but the growing anti-war sentiment in the US combined with planned troops reductions made obvious that time was running out.

After losing its logistical bases in Cambodia, the NVA sought to protect its remaining bases in Laos. The Ho Chi Minh trail was greatly expanded to encompass over 13,000 kilometers of roads and smaller trails. The incursion into Cambodia showed the NVA that the US and ARVN now had the potential and willingness to attack into their previous sanctuaries and so in addition to improving the trail, they also increased the defenses. In late 1970, twenty

anti-aircraft battalions were moved into Laos as well as roughly 22 thousand troops under a new organization, the 70B Corps.¹⁶ These forces began large stockpiling of weapons and ammunition in preparation for future offensives and facilitated the infiltration of six thousand combat troops per month into South Vietnam.¹⁷ As 1970 came to a close, Vietnamization was about to face its next test in the 1971 fighting season.

Nixon, Kissinger, and General Abrams, among others, were alarmed at the increased buildup and believed a pre-emptive strike into Laos could repeat the success of the Cambodian operation and buy ARVN another year to continue to expand and develop. A plan was devised in which ARVN, supported by US aircraft and artillery, would use the threat of a US amphibious feint by the 31st MEU in North Vietnam to attack west into Laos along route 9 and seize NVA base areas 604 and 611 in vicinity of Tchepone. From there, they would destroy the base areas and interdict supplies moving south for 90 days until the monsoon season made movement difficult. United States intelligence believed that the operation would be lightly opposed, as all previous cross border operations had, ignoring the fact that the Ho Chi Minh trail was the NVA lifeline to its forces in South Vietnam and Cambodia after losing the port at Sihanoukville.¹⁸ The US expected a repeat of the Cambodian experience but there were several major differences in Laos that would prove to be critical.

The first major difference was that during Lam Son 719, no US forces would accompany the ARVN into Laos. A modified version of the Cooper Church amendment had passed in January which forbade ground forces from entering Cambodia and Laos. This included advisors, artillery observers and forward air controllers. US support would be limited to logistical helicopter support, tactical airstrikes, US artillery located in South Vietnam, and US units holding key positions in South Vietnam freeing up ARVN units to conduct the operation.¹⁹

The second major difference was the terrain and weather in Laos were much less favorable for offensive operations than was the case in Cambodia. The operation was to be conducted at the tail end of the Northeast Monsoon which limited low level operations to a period between 1000 to 1500 due to low clouds. This was compounded by mountainous terrain that paralleled both sides of Route 9, forcing aircraft into channelized and predictable routes that could be exploited by enemy air defenses.²⁰

The final major difference was that the NVA expected the attack and began preparing for it as early as October of 1970. In addition to the roughly 22,000 NVA forces in the area against 17,000 ARVN at the beginning of the operation, the NVA had built defensive fortifications, prepared ambush sites, and pre-registered artillery on likely LZs. NVA leadership ordered base area 604 near Tchepone held at all costs and reinforced with elements of four separate divisions with supporting artillery bringing the total NVA troop strength to over 40,000 by the end of the operation.²¹

The ARVN attack commenced on February 8th and made decent progress towards the first intermediate objectives at the town of A Luoi and several outlying patrol/fire bases. The US amphibious feint off the coast of North Vietnam was successful and the NVA and 70B corps leadership held back their forces until they determined the main attack. Despite early success, the political nature of the South Vietnamese military quickly emerged. Although LtGen Lam was in overall command of the operations, the subordinate commanders of the Airborne and Marine divisions, themselves Lt. Generals, ignored Lam and only took orders from President Thieu.²² Compounding the lack of unity of command, President Thieu intervened for political reasons. LtGen Davidson suggests that President Thieu feared the effect high casualties might have on his election later that year and the potential for losses in his general reserve which

doubled as Palace guard. On February 12 he ordered Lam and the other division commanders to “be cautious in moving west and to cancel the operation once the ARVN force had taken 3,000 casualties.”²³ This order stifled all forward momentum while the NVA reinforced and encircled the ARVN positions. On 28 February, Thieu again inserted himself into the operations by ordering the Airborne brigade, his counter coup force, on the front lines to be replaced by the Marine division which was in vicinity of Khe Sanh. General Lam flew to Saigon to protest and convinced President Thieu to alter his order. The objective of the entire operation then changed from occupying and destroying the base areas to a heliborne seizure of now empty Tchepone followed by heliborne withdrawal of all forces from Laos.²⁴

While the South Vietnamese achieved a political and symbolic victory when they captured Tchepone on 8 March, the withdrawal that lasted from 8 March to 23 March did much greater damage to them psychologically and again revealed weaknesses in the Vietnamization program. The NVA attempted to decimate the retreating forces with over 10 regiments while US air support desperately attempted to hold them off. The loss of material and personnel on both sides was immense. Estimates of NVA losses vary between 19 and 26 thousand troops as well as 106 tanks, 2,001 vehicles, 170 tons of ammunition, and 1,250 tons of rice.²⁵ ARVN suffered nearly a 50 percent casualty rate with 9,000 killed, wounded, or captured. Despite having no ground presence, the US suffered 253 killed and 1,149 wounded and lost seven fighter bombers, 108 helicopters destroyed, and 618 helicopters damaged.²⁶

Lam Son 719 highlighted critical deficiencies and flaws in the Vietnamization strategy. The issue of inept leadership and politicized generals was again clearly highlighted. More alarming was the inability of the ARVN to effectively coordinate their own fire support and logistical support without US advisors. During the operation, US helicopters flew more than

160,000 sorties and fixed wing conducted more than 10,000 strikes.²⁷ Without this support, which would no longer be available once the US completed its withdrawal, the operation would have been a complete disaster. Media reports also highlighted panic stricken ARVN soldiers clinging to helicopter skids in attempt to withdraw and the abandoning of dead soldiers in Laos traumatized many of the South Vietnamese public.

Despite the outcome and depleted morale, both President Thieu and Nixon claimed success. In a televised address on April 7th 1971, Nixon announced that in his opinion the Laotian operation was successful. First he claimed that without advisers, the ARVN demonstrated they could fight against the “very best troops the NVA could put in the field.” The role of US air and logistical support made this claim misleading at best. Second, he pointed to the fact that the NVA suffered more casualties than the ARVN. Again this was mostly due to US artillery and air support. Finally he claimed that the impact to NVAs ability to conduct operations in South Vietnam was hampered even more than after the Cambodian operations. He then announced that “Vietnamization has succeeded” and he was accelerating the withdrawal of an additional 100,000 US forces in 1971.²⁸ The lack of Vietnamese leadership, lack of indigenous fire and air support, and the dependence on US support to conduct operations highlighted by Lam Son 719 indicate Vietnamization had not succeeded.

While Lam Son 719 was occurring, the Politburo had already laid the groundwork for their next offensive in 1972. In December 1970 and January 1971 the 19th Plenary Session of the Lao Dong Party decided to execute an all-out conventional military attack in an attempt to end the war. The Politburo decided that even partial success would strengthen the North’s negotiating position.²⁹ The Plenum decided on 1972 for several reasons. First, most of the US combat forces would be gone from the country in 1972 and Nixon had shown he was

withdrawing forces without respect to actual conditions in South Vietnam. If the North was successful in its offensive while US forces were still in the country, they could claim victory over America. 1972 was an US election year as well, and if the offensive was successful, the Politburo foresaw Nixon losing re-election. Communist General Secretary Le Duan then traveled to Moscow where he requested resupply and assistance from the Soviets. While infiltrators conducted sporadic harassment, the North spent the rest of 1971 re-equipping and preparing for their next offensive with the latest Soviet equipment. The South attempted to reconstitute and correct issues identified by their abortive operation in Laos and the US continued to withdraw combat forces and turn bases over to the ARVN.³⁰

Intelligence detected large formations of tanks and artillery being moved down the Ho Chi Minh trail in late 1971. When combined with the break off of negotiations in Paris, US and ARVN were well aware of an impending NVA assault but unsure of the timing. The decision was made by General Giap to execute between 1 February and 31 May depending on when weather would be the most favorable for all portions of the country.³¹ The offensive was known as “Nguyen Hue” in the North and later as the Easter Offensive by the US. The plan called for a three pronged invasion with the entirety of North Vietnam’s combat power. In total 14 NVA infantry divisions and 26 separate regiments consisting of over 130,000 troops and 1,300 tanks would attack three critical areas in the south beginning on 30 March.³² In the north, forces would attack across the DMZ and seize Quang Tri and Hue city, the historic imperial capitol. In the central area, South Vietnam would be split in two by seizing Kontum and Pleiku and then expanding east. Finally, in the south Loc Ninh and An Loc would be seized in order to allow the installation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government and follow on operations against Saigon. While each of these individual areas was important, most critical was An Loc

because if it was captured the NVA would be within 65 miles of Saigon with a high speed avenue of approach down Route 13.

The southern province of Binh Long, of which An Loc was the provincial capitol, was defended by the ARVN 5th division. The ARVN 5th division was spread out between An Loc and Loc Ninh to the north. On the NVA side, three reinforced divisions would take part. The 7th NVA division would attack south of An Loc and set up defensive positions along route 13 in order to isolate An Loc, the 5th VC Division would seize Loc Ninh in the northern portion of the province, and the 9th VC Division would seize An Loc. On 4 April, responding to the degrading situation near Quang Tri in the north, President Nixon authorized bombing in North Vietnam up to the 18th parallel and ordered reinforcements of air and naval assets to stop the offensive. Within 60 days, 100 B-52 bombers, four aircraft carriers, 32 naval ships, and hundreds of tactical aircraft had made their way into theater.³³ This influx of US firepower would prove to be essential in stopping the NVA onslaught.

After a feint in the western Tay Ninh province, the main assault on Loc Ninh began on the morning of 5 April. The town was defended by the 9th Regiment of the 5th ARVN division. It had some light artillery and prepared defensive positions consisting of bunkers, motion sensors, and wire obstacles. Most important were seven US advisors including Vietnamese speaker and special forces Captain Mark A. Smith. His language ability and tactical acumen made him the de-facto leader of the advisory party at Loc Ninh.³⁴ After massive artillery preparation which stunned the defenders, the NVA attacked with mass infantry and tanks. The first attack was stopped by tactical airstrikes, predominantly from A-37 fighters. A second attack was stopped at noon by an AC-130 Spectre gunship. A third and final attack on the eastern perimeter was stopped by AH-1G from 2nd Battalion, 20th Artillery aerial rocket artillery

squadron call sign “Blue Max”.³⁵ While air support directed from US advisors saved Loc Ninh on the first day, intense bombardment and repeated human wave assaults accompanied by tanks eventually overwhelmed the defenders and the city was lost on 7 April. Only one US advisor survived Loc Ninh, Capt Smith, and over 1,000 ARVN surrendered.³⁶

The 9th VC Division was not logistically prepared to commence their attack on An Loc until 13 April and this brief reprieve allowed President Thieu to send the 21st ARVN division east from Tay Ninh and the last airborne brigade of his general reserve to assist the defenders at An Loc. While these forces were unable to break through the NVA blocking position south of An Loc, they at least tied up the 7th VC division and prevented their employment in taking the city.³⁷ The NVA settled into a siege of An Loc consisting of massive daily artillery bombardment and sporadic attempts to seize the city and destroy the remnants of the 3,000 strong defense. The first major attack occurred from 13 to 15 April. Fortunately for the defenders, the Soviet T-54 tanks were often able to be destroyed piecemeal by US supplied M-72 anti-tank weapons and air strikes due to poor integration with NVA infantry in the urban terrain of An Loc. The attacks each day were generally repulsed by B-52 strikes on staging and logistical areas and fixed and rotary wing strikes directed against forces that made it closer to the town. In the first two weeks of the battle, over 2,500 air strikes were executed in and around the town of An Loc.³⁸ A second offensive was launched on 19 April, and the NVA managed to take most of the city before again being stopped by US air support and the ARVN defenders. Exhaustion of their logistical supplies and forced to regroup after massive casualties, the NVA were unable to conduct their final attack until 11 May. During this time, the ARVN were able to reinforce with the elite 81st Ranger group.³⁹ After a two day preparatory barrage, the NVA commenced the final attack by shelling the city with more than seven thousand artillery rounds

over a four hour period. After a 30 minute respite, 10,000 additional rounds hit the city over the next 10 hours.⁴⁰ During the first day alone, 297 fixed wing sorties were flown and 30 B-52 strikes were executed in addition to Blue Max and Spectre gunship sorties.⁴¹ While the final battle of An Loc lasted four days, the defenders were ultimately able to hold out due to air support directed by US advisors and flown by US military aircraft.

The ARVN were initially responsible for logistical resupply of the besieged force. They had to not only feed the defenders but the trapped civilians within the city and estimates put the need at 200 tons of supplies per day. After a Vietnamese CH-47 was shot down on 12 April, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) attempted to conduct aerial delivery of resupply via C-123 and C-119. From 13 to 16 April, 27 sorties dropped 135 tons of supply. However, only 34 tons were collected by defenders.⁴² After two VNAF C-123s were destroyed while airborne, the Vietnamese ceased air resupply forcing the US Air force to pick up the mission. The US Air Force C-130 pilots faced nine anti-aircraft battalions around the city as well as the first utilization of Soviet provided SA-7 infra-red seeking missiles on 29 April.⁴³ It took US parachute riggers from Okinawa and Taiwan and the utilization of a new high speed drogue chute with special packaging to solve the resupply problem posed by the dense anti-air threat.⁴⁴ After 8 May, the US was able to air drop 2,984 tons of supply of which 90% was recovered by the defenders.⁴⁵ Without US specialist parachute riggers and US Air Force(USAF) pilots and crew, the defenders of An Loc would not have been able to survive.

The ability for the North Vietnamese to sustain their offensive was severely hampered after Nixon ordered the mining of Haiphong harbor and the destruction of North Vietnamese infrastructure during operation Linebacker. This lack of sustainment combined with the devastating losses delivered by US air and naval fires eventually stopped the Easter Offensive

and the NVA were pushed out of all major cities they had seized. While the Easter Offensive was a military failure for the NVA, there were still several major strategic victories. First, the offensive highlighted the relative weakness and static nature of the ARVN divisions. The US advisors had been training them for small scale pacification related missions and when the NVA conducted a large scale conventional assault, the leadership was largely unable to command and control such a battle and many of the units simply collapsed when faced with the threat of NVA tanks. Second, the ARVN had become even more overly reliant on US advisors and airpower to conduct operations. LtGen Davidson relates that many units were de facto led by the US advisors and many others would not commence an attack without the US first conducting air strikes.⁴⁶ Third, the bombing of North Vietnam and the mining of the Haiphong harbor renewed US anti-war sentiment and turned Congress against the president even more.

Many full books could be devoted to the events that occurred from after the Easter Offensive till the fall of Saigon in 1975. Over simply, the US continued to draw down and claim Vietnamization had succeeded while the North Vietnamese and US signed a peace deal without real support from South Vietnam and President Thieu. The US made back channel promises to aid South Vietnam in the event of violations. Once US forces and prisoners of war were out of Vietnam and after the American popular opinion and impending impeachment led to Nixon's resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Congress steadily reduced military aid, support, and legal authority to conduct operations in South Vietnam. The ARVN fought valiantly, using the tactics taught by US advisors, but were unable to sustain their losses. Without US military aid and support, without fully developed and tested leadership, and without accepting that America would not come to its aid and re-enter the war, South Vietnam collapsed in the 1975 fighting season.

Iraq

President George W. Bush laid out the US exit strategy from Iraq on the one year anniversary of the transfer of sovereignty back to the Iraqi government. On June 28, 2005 he stated, “Our strategy can be summed up this way: As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.”⁴⁷ The strategy’s three pillars were to partner US units with Iraqi units, to embed US advisors with Iraqi units, and to mentor senior military and Iraqi leadership on the best employment of their forces.⁴⁸ In Vietnam, the US trained ARVN largely on how to employ small unit tactics in support of the pacification program. President Bush’s speech directly stated that our enemy was not a military force but terrorists and so it followed that we trained the Iraqis to conduct counter insurgency and counter terrorism and not for large scale conventional warfare.

In December of 2006, as the insurgency grew and sectarian violence caused chaos throughout Iraq, the congressionally appointed Iraq Studies Group (ISG) released its report. Future Secretary of Defense and ISG member Leon Panetta summarized the assessment and recommendations in an article for the *Monterey County Herald*. In the article he stated that, “...sectarian factions...control the political leadership; the Iraqi police are largely ineffective and corrupt; the basic needs of people...are not being delivered; the neighboring nations are either standing on the sidelines or helping foment instability; and the US military mission is torn between trying to clear and hold areas in Baghdad and fighting sectarian militias.”⁴⁹ At a time when 70% of the public no longer supported the war in Iraq, Panetta and the ISG recommended that the US, “shift the primary military mission of US forces from combat to training and support by embedding our best combat units in Iraqi army units,” and, “gradually withdrawing all combat brigades by the first quarter of 2008.”⁵⁰ In Vietnam, the strategy was to replace

American combat forces with South Vietnamese in order to fight Viet Cong insurgents and NVA regulars. In Iraq, the strategy was to replace American combat forces with Iraqi police and military to fight Sunni insurgents and sectarian militias often supported and encouraged by foreign nations. It was “Vietnamization” by another name.

In January of 2007, President Bush announced what would be come to be known as the “surge”, an additional deployment of 20,000 US forces to bring stability to Baghdad and surrounding Anbar province and to allow the Iraqi forces to mature. The President announced that Iraq had until November of 2007 to take over security responsibility for all of Iraq.⁵¹ At the tactical level US advisors and military units bought time for the Iraqis. At the strategic level Ambassador Ryan Crocker, General David Petraeus and even the President helped counsel Prime Minister (PM) Maliki on how to defeat the insurgency and lead Iraq.⁵² The surge, with the assistance of Sunni tribes, defeated the Al-Qaeda insurgency in the northwest and this victory in part led to the signing of a status of forces agreement (SOFA) in Dec 2008. The SOFA called for all US forces to sequester themselves primarily to bases unless support was directly requested from Iraqis and called for all US forces to withdraw from Iraq no later than 31 December, 2011.⁵³

As it became apparent that the US was withdrawing, PM Maliki began a concerted effort to consolidate his power. He purged most of the military of Sunni members, targeted rivals with de-bathification laws or allegations of terrorism, and installed and promoted loyalty bound officers to key positions.⁵⁴ Furthermore, he ignored the established military chain of command and assumed the duties of minister of defense, interior, and intelligence after refusing to appoint anyone to those posts after the 2010 parliamentary elections. A combination of President Obama’s election promise to end the Iraq war and the combined desire of the Iraqi populace and

Iran's insistence that all Americans leave Iraq led to a failure to extend the SOFA and a withdrawal of all American forces in December of 2011.⁵⁵ Similar to Vietnam with President Thieu, the US stuck with a politically divisive and corrupt leader without forcing real reconciliation in order to complete its military withdrawal.

The Iraqi chief of army, General Babakir Zebari, stated that Iraq's security forces would need assistance till at least 2020.⁵⁶ One critical area this assistance could have helped with was combating corruption and increasing professionalism of the Iraqi military. After the US withdrew, Iraqi military officers began buying their commissions. On the black market they sold weapons, food, and ammunition meant for troops, extorted money from civilians, and accepted bribes from soldiers in order to be absent. The higher ranking officers were protected from investigation and prosecution due to political patronage, often directly from Prime Minister Maliki.⁵⁷ By 2014, the sectarian military did little more than man checkpoints. And while it had 280 thousand active duty on paper, estimates put the actual strength at as little as 50 thousand.⁵⁸

After months of infiltration, targeted assassination, and recruitment from the disaffected Sunni population in the Northwest ISIS launched their offensive. They took Fallujah in January of 2014, and, after the government failed to respond, stunned the Iraqi government and the world when they seized the second largest city in Iraq, Mosul, in June of 2014.⁵⁹ Two divisions of Iraqi military and an additional division of Iraqi police in Mosul collapsed and fled after initial ISIS attacks with suicide vehicle based improvised explosive devices (SVBIED) and captured Iraqi police vehicles. Most alarming was that the ISIS attack consisted of only a few hundred fighters.⁶⁰ In June, PM Maliki requested the US conduct air strikes on the advancing ISIS fighters but the Obama administration and Congress refused until he stepped down.⁶¹

The ISIS fighters used thousands of captured military vehicles and weapons left behind by the Iraqis to capture Tikrit. But after being stalled by Shi'ite militias in vicinity of Baghdad, pushed north towards Erbil in Kurdish controlled territory. They captured the Mosul dam and the town of Sinjar and began a siege of the remaining Yazidi minority group in vicinity of the Sinjar mountain.⁶² The combination of the genocide of the Yazidis, with the threat to the US consulate in Erbil and US forces embedded with the Kurdish militia, the peshmerga, prompted the US to act. On August 7, 2014 President Obama announced that the US would conduct air drops of supplies to the Yazidis and would conduct air strikes if ISIS advanced further towards Erbil.⁶³ The US response in Iraq differed from 1975 in Vietnam in that the US did not leave Iraq to its fate but only intervened once the political leadership had changed.

The pace of US involvement escalated rapidly, and the strategy announced by the US was similar to that utilized in 1972. On September 10, 2014, only days after the first US captives were shown on video being beheaded by ISIS, President Obama announced the plan “to degrade and ultimately destroy the terrorist group known as ISIL.”⁶⁴ One of the most critical portions of the President’s speech occurred when he stated, “American power can make a decisive difference, but we cannot do for Iraqis what they must do for themselves, nor can we take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.”⁶⁵ Just as President Bush alluded in 2005, President Obama had given voice to a modern version of Vietnamization as US strategy. The strategy laid out to the American populace in the remainder of the speech called for a systematic campaign of air strikes, increased support to forces fighting on the ground including an additional 475 US military service members, increased assistance to the Syrian opposition, and humanitarian assistance for displaced people. The President made it clear in his speech that US forces would not have a combat mission, and were to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces with

training, intelligence, and equipment.⁶⁶ By the end of September 2014, the US would be conducting air strikes and supply drops in support of besieged Kurds in the Syrian town of Khobani and the threatened Kurdish capitol of Erbil as US advisors incrementally flowed back into Iraq.⁶⁷

One of the first troubling indicators of repeating the mistakes of Vietnamization occurred in March of 2015. Over twenty thousand Shi'ite militia known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), largely trained and equipped by the Iranian Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), unilaterally launched an operation to retake Tikrit. In order to prevent the loss of credibility by lacking control of a military operation inside Iraq, new Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi reluctantly sent roughly 2,000 Iraqi military to assist. The US refused to conduct air strikes in support of Iranian backed militias and the attack stalled in mid-March. PM Abadi was forced to ask the US for air support, which the US provided on the condition that the Iranian militias pull back. With US air and advisor support, Tikrit was able to be retaken.⁶⁸ While it was important to lesson Iranian influence over Iraqi decision makers, utilizing US air support to allow the clearing of Tikrit instead of waiting for newly training Iraqi military forces to mobilize and capture it themselves started a trend of US airpower and logistics support being relied upon for any Iraqi military progress.

The next troubling trend occurred after the fall of Ramadi and has continued ever since. In May of 2015, after over a year of a slowly building insurgency, the Shi'ite Iraqi government's presence was limited in the largely Sunni Anbar province city. Five Iraqi divisions were unable to pacify the province and government forces held a tenuous foothold at the central administrative complex. ISIS fighters used the cover of a sand storm as well as mass suicide bombing attacks to overwhelm the defenders and shortly after the government complex and

Anbar Operations Command were overrun, the Iraqi military surrendered the city to ISIS control.⁶⁹ President Obama grew increasingly frustrated and during an interview frankly stated that, "...if the Iraqis themselves are not willing or capable to arrive at the political accommodations necessary to govern, if they are not willing to fight for the security of their country, we cannot do that for them."⁷⁰ US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter was far more blunt when he stated in an interview, "What apparently happened was that the Iraqi forces just showed no will to fight. They were not outnumbered. In fact, they vastly outnumbered the opposing force, and yet they failed to fight...and that says to me...that we have an issue with the will of the Iraqis to fight ISIL and defend themselves."⁷¹ The lack of ability and willpower of largely Shi'ite Iraqi army forces to conduct military operations in Sunni areas is similar to the inability of most ARVN regular divisions to operate outside their corps battlespace. In September 2015, the Iraqi military had made little to no progress in retaking Ramadi and the Iraqi general in charge of Anbar, Maj. Gen. Qasim al-Mohammadi blamed "not enough airstrikes from the coalition to clear targets on the ground,"⁷² an accusation which was quickly refuted by the US. The lack of will and ability of regular Iraqi army units has forced the Iraqi military to rely almost exclusively on the elite Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) for offensive operations to recapture Ramadi, similar to the ARVN utilization of their elite units from 1970 to 1972. The coalition executed more than 630 air strikes in or around Ramadi from July 2015 to January 2016, and Iraqi CTS commander LtGen Asadi admitted that, "his counterterrorism force advanced only after the coalition had cleared the way."⁷⁴

By September of 2016, the coalition had flown a total of 43,611 close air support, escort, and interdiction sorties in support of OIR and had employed at least one weapon on 19,786 of them. In addition to the strike sorties, by September the coalition had airlifted over 87,700

personnel, transported 140,955 short tons of equipment, and airdropped 1,489,221 pounds of supplies.⁷⁵ Concurrent with the rise in air strikes, the US increased its authorized number of forces from 300 in June 2014 to over 5,000 by the end of September 2016.⁷⁶ The US strategy would face its biggest test in October of 2016 when the effort to retake Mosul commenced.

On October 17, 2016, PM Abadi announced that the offensive to retake Mosul had begun. The city, where ISIS had declared its caliphate in 2014, was defended by an estimated four to eight thousand ISIS fighters intermixed with 600,000 civilians. The Iraqi offensive consisted of roughly 30,000 troops split among regular Iraqi Army, federal police, elite CTS divisions, Kurdish Peshmerga, and Iranian backed PMF.⁷⁷ US assistance in the early stage of the offensive consisted of over 100 advisors, mostly special forces and joint terminal attack controllers (JTACS), embedded at the division level in addition to support from US 155 millimeter artillery and air support.⁷⁸ The hardest and most dangerous fighting in and around Mosul continued to be conducted by the CTS. The “Golden Division”, one of three brigades within the CTS controlled directly from the Prime Minister’s office, was responsible for many of the gains made in eastern Mosul during November. The CTS conducted several operational pauses in October and November to allow underperforming regular Iraqi Army units to catch up, but the entire offensive stalled in mid December as the CTS confronted a 50% casualty rate within their brigades.⁷⁹

The loss of so many highly trained soldiers risked the CTS’ combat effectiveness and forced the US to embed advisors down to the battalion level in mid December in order to sustain the momentum of the offensive.⁸⁰ The CTS increasingly relied on air strikes to destroy buildings instead of conducting house to house clearing in order to limit casualties and regular Iraqi units would often not advance without air strikes preceding their attack.⁸¹ The US’ increasing role on

the front lines was evidenced by 14 American military personnel being wounded between October and early January 2017.⁸² Overall, Iraqi military advances from Ramadi to Mosul continue to rely excessively on US advisors and air support for tactical gains. The Iraqi force we have trained has demonstrated that despite an over a four to one numerical advantage it cannot dislodge a sophisticated enemy from urban terrain without sustained US logistical and fire support. Similar to Vietnam, training a force for counter insurgency leaves it vulnerable to conventional tactics and vice versa. There is no guarantee that after Mosul the Iraqi military will be able to prevent another insurgency or even defend against another threat with the capabilities and willpower that ISIS has displayed.

Conclusion

The 2007 surge in Iraq was similar to the Cambodian offensive of 1970. Both were predominantly US led, both gave crucial time for the supported military to grow and professionalize, and both gave US leaders a military victory that set the stage for a political withdrawal. The period from 2011 till 2014 in Iraq was similar to the Lam Son offensive in 1971. Both periods demonstrated that without integrated US advisors and competent political and military leadership, neither supported military was tactically or technically proficient enough to successfully execute the missions assigned to them. In Vietnam, overwhelming airpower saved the retreat from being a total rout. In Iraq, conditions based air support led to a change of political leadership and prevented the continued advance of ISIS towards Baghdad. The current campaign against ISIS is similar to the 1972 Easter Offensive. Both feature a refusal of the US to utilize its own front line combat forces and reliance on advisors, logistical support, and air support. Both also masked the structural and institutional weaknesses of the supported military

by allowing air strikes to cover for a lack of ability to clear and hold terrain from a determined enemy. The South Vietnamese government never came to terms with the idea that there would come a time when the US would no longer support them. When that time came in 1975, system failure and collapse followed. The re-introduction of US forces into Iraq may to some extent be leading the Iraqi government down the same path. There will come a time when ISIS is removed from its final Iraqi stronghold of Mosul, but the ability of the Iraqi military and government to endure against the next threat without the guidance, equipment, planning, and air support provided by the United States is very much in question. The experience of Vietnamization and the fight against ISIS suggests that when the US trains and assists foreign militaries, they are often not capable of planning, executing, and sustaining the American way of warfighting without counting on US support that itself is largely contingent on US political will. In the author's judgment, the tendency of the US to use its overwhelming airpower advantage as not an enabler but as a crutch for foreign militaries leads to tactical success, but strategic failure.

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