

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #22

Praised for his efforts to lessen Cold War tensions because of his negotiations with China and the Soviet Union, President Richard Nixon also had tactical objectives in mind in 1972. He hoped that by befriendng both those Communist nations, he could play one against the other and strike a better deal over Vietnam at the ongoing peace talks in Paris. His second strategy, however, proved to be less praiseworthy and cost more American lives.

In April, 1972, in an attempt to strengthen his negotiating position, Nixon ordered B-52 bombing raids against North Vietnam. One month later, he approved the mining of North Vietnamese ports, something President Lyndon Johnson had never dared to do. The North Vietnamese, however, were not isolated. Supplies from the Soviet Union continued, and the Vietcong fought on.

With the 1972 presidential election approaching and mounting social divisions within the U.S., a shift occurred in the American negotiating position in Paris. In the summer Nixon sent Henry Kissinger back to the Paris peace talks, initiated under Johnson. Kissinger again began meeting privately with Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator. In a key concession Kissinger dropped his insistence on the removal of all North Vietnamese troops from South Vietnam before the withdrawal of American soldiers. North Vietnam then agreed to an interim arrangement whereby the Saigon government would stay in power while a special commission arranged a final settlement. On October 26, only a week before the American presidential election, Kissinger announced that “peace is at hand.”

But this was a cynical ploy to win votes. Several days earlier the American-supported regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu in South Vietnam had rejected the plan for a cease-fire, fearful that the presence of North Vietnamese troops in the south virtually guaranteed an eventual Communist victory. So Nixon got the election lift that he wanted. But the agreement was sabotaged by Thieu. Talks broke off in Paris on December 16. Two days later, in one final spasm of bloodletting, Nixon unleashed the saturation bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, the two largest cities in North Vietnam. These so-called Christmas bombings by B-52s were the most savage of the entire war. Simultaneously, the Americans again mined North Vietnamese harbors. These actions aroused worldwide protest. A *New York Times* editorial read, “Civilized man will be horrified.” Fifteen of the giant B-52s were shot down. Captured American pilots and crewmen were paraded before television cameras in Hanoi to “express regret” at the civilian deaths and carnage.

But the bombings also made the North Vietnamese more flexible at the negotiating table. The “Christmas bombings” stopped on December 29th, and the resumption of talks in Paris soon followed. On January 27, 1973, the United States signed an “agreement on ending the war and restoring peace in Vietnam.” While Nixon and Kissinger both claimed that the bombing had brought North Vietnam to its senses, the North Vietnamese never altered their basic stance. They kept troops in the south and remained committed to the reunification of Vietnam under one government. What had changed since the previous fall

was the willingness of the South Vietnamese to accept these terms, although reluctantly, on the basis of Nixon's promise that the U.S. would respond "with full force" to any violation of the agreement.

On March 29, 1973, the last American combat troops left Vietnam. On that same day the last of several hundred American prisoners of war, most of them downed pilots, were released from Hanoi. Nixon had hoped that with massive American aid the Thieu regime might survive. Within a period of months, however, the cease-fire in Vietnam ended. The war between north and south resumed, and the military superiority of the Communist forces soon became evident.

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., Congress was in revolt. It refused appropriations for bombing Cambodia after August 15, 1973, and gradually cut back aid to South Vietnam. In Cambodia (renamed Kampuchea after it fell to the Communists) and Laos, where fighting had been more sporadic, Communist victory also seemed inevitable.

In March, 1975 the North Vietnamese launched a final, full-scale armored invasion against the south. Thieu appealed to the U.S. for assistance. Congress again refused. The much-mentioned "peace with honor" had proved to be, in the words of one CIA official, only "a decent interval" – enough time for the U.S. to extricate itself from Vietnam before the collapse of the South Vietnamese government. On April 30, 1975, Americans watched on television as North Vietnamese tanks rolled into Saigon, which they soon renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the founding father of the Communist regime. Helicopters lifted the officials in the American embassy to ships waiting offshore. In those last desperate moments, terrified South Vietnamese fought to get on the helicopters as they took off. A sign in the embassy courtyard read, "Turn off the light at the end of the tunnel when you leave."

The longest war in American history up to that time was finally over. It left in its wake a bitter legacy. The collapse of South Vietnam in 1975 embodied a powerful, and tragic, historical irony. The Paris Peace Accords produced an outcome little different from what would likely have resulted from the 1954 Geneva Accords that called for elections within two years to unify the troubled nation. The Eisenhower administration had rejected the Geneva Accords in 1954 and had immediately set about undermining them with a pro-American government, which was now in ruins. The most disastrous military venture of the U.S. in the twentieth century barely altered the geopolitical realities in Southeast Asia. The Hanoi regime called itself Communist but never intended to be a satellite of any country, least of all China, the ancient enemy of Vietnam.

Many paid a steep price for the Vietnam War. America's Vietnamese friends lost jobs and property, spent years in "reeducation" camps, died violent deaths, or had to flee the country. During the period of American involvement in the fighting, almost two millions Vietnamese combatants and civilians had died in a decade of war, which included some of the most intensive aerial bombing of the twentieth century. Next door in Cambodia, the maniacal Khmer Rouge, followers of the Cambodia's ruling Communist party, took over

and murdered 1.7 million people in bloody purges. More than 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam, 300,000 were wounded, 2,500 were declared missing in action, almost 100,000 returned missing one or more limbs, and over 150,000 combat veterans suffered drug or alcohol addiction or severe psychological disorders. The war had also cost the nation \$150 billion.

Internal wounds were slow to heal and divided the American nation. Most Vietnam veterans readjusted well to civilian life, but even they carried unfairly for years the stigma of a “lost war.” Unlike World War II troops who returned to the U.S. as heroes, the Vietnam vets were treated poorly by many American citizens. The “loss” of the war and revelations of American atrocities, such as the My Lai massacre, eroded respect for the military so thoroughly that many young Americans came to regard military service as corrupting and ignoble. The war, described as a noble crusade on behalf of democratic ideals, instead suggested that democracy was not easily transferable to Third World regions that lacked any historical experience with Western values and representative government. The war that had been fought to show the world that the United States would be steadfast in containing the spread of communism instead sapped the national will and fragmented that national consensus that had governed American foreign policy since the end of World War II.

Because of the war, Americans increasingly lost confidence in their political leaders. The war changed the balance of power in domestic politics. Not only did the war cause the downfall of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency. It also created enduring divisions within the Democrat party. Anti-war Senator George McGovern of South Dakota, the Democrat nominee for president in 1972, stated that “the Vietnam tragedy is at the root of the confusion and division of the Democratic party. It tore up our souls.”

It is, therefore, not surprising that most Americans at the end of the war wanted to “put Vietnam behind us” and forget. Although subsequent debates over American foreign policy in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America frequently involved recourse to “the lessons of Vietnam,” the phrase was used by different political factions for diametrically opposed purposes, ranging from refusal to commit any troops and resources in El Salvador and Nicaragua to an insistence on massive military commitments unfettered by diplomatic restrictions that might preclude outright victory in Iraq and Afghanistan. One journalist wrote concerning Vietnam, “In the end, then, there was no end at all.”