

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #33D

President Lyndon Johnson and the Democrat party proved ill equipped to resolve the issues regarding Vietnam as well as the antiwar movement at home. Richard M. Nixon, a Republican from California and the former vice-president under Dwight Eisenhower, was the nominee of his party in 1968 for the presidency. Nixon showed himself to be an effective manipulator of the unrest in the United States through carefully timed speeches and strategic displays of moral outrage. Late in 1969, following a massive antiwar rally in Washington, D.C., President Nixon gave a televised speech in which he referred to his supporters as the “silent majority.” It was classic Nixonian rhetoric. In a single phrase, he summed up a generational and cultural struggle placing himself on the side of ordinary Americans against the rabble-rousers and troublemakers. The label, “silent majority,” stuck. Nixon had defined a political phenomenon. For the remainder of his presidency, he cultivated the impression that he was the defender of a reasonable middle ground under assault from the radical left. Large as the gap was between the “silent majority” and the forces of dissent, both sides agreed that the Vietnam War remained the dominant event of the time. Until the war was ended and all American troops had returned home, the nation would find it difficult to achieve the equilibrium and moderation that the new president had promised.

Regarding Vietnam, Nixon picked up where Johnson had left off. Abandoning Vietnam, Nixon insisted, would damage the credibility of the United States and make the nation appear to be “a pitiful, helpless giant.” During the presidential campaign of 1968, he had claimed to have a secret plan that would bring “peace with honor.” He wanted peace, but only “peace with honor.” Peace, however, was long in coming and not very honorable. The North Vietnamese were not about to oblige President Nixon. The only outcome acceptable to them was a unified Vietnam under their control.

Nixon appointed William P. Rogers as his secretary of state. They had been close friends for years. Therefore, it was thought that the secretary of state would be a personal confidant of the president rather than a force in diplomacy. The conjecture was heightened because Nixon had strong ideas about the place of the United States in the world. Rogers, a distinguished lawyer, was not steeped in foreign policy. Moreover, he was burdened by a shadow – that of Henry Kissinger, a professor of international relations at Harvard, who became Nixon’s special assistant for national security affairs. In that capacity Kissinger all but supplanted Rogers as the chief architect of Nixon’s foreign policy. Rogers served Nixon as well as he could as secretary of state. An honest man, Rogers left the Nixon administration in 1973, unblemished by the Watergate scandals.

Kissinger insisted that the war in Indochina was a mere “sideshow” of considerably less significance than American interests in Europe and the Middle East. Even so, American withdrawal from Vietnam was agonizingly slow. The Nixon administration, even while withdrawing American forces, held to a policy that it was contrary to the American national interest to let the North Vietnamese dominate Indochina.

The new Vietnam policy of the Nixon administration moved along three separate fronts. First, American negotiators in Paris insisted on the withdrawal of Communist forces from South Vietnam and the preservation of the American supported regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong negotiators insisted on the retention of a military presence in the south and the reunification of the Vietnamese people under a government dominated by the Communists. There was no common ground on which to come together. It required months before the parties could even agree on the shape of the table around which they would meet.

Second, Nixon tried to quell domestic unrest over the war. He reduced the number of American troops in Vietnam and began delegating the ground fighting there to the South Vietnamese. To neutralize criticism of his foreign policy at home, he justified the reduction as the natural result of “Vietnamization” – the equipping and training of the South Vietnamese to assume the burden of ground combat in place of Americans. Under this new policy American combat troops were withdrawn at a gradual and steady pace that matched almost precisely the American buildup from 1965 to 1969. From a peak of 542,000 soldiers in 1969, levels dropped to 334,000 in 1971. By 1973 only 50,000 American troops remained in Vietnam. Early in that year the number dwindled to barely 24,000.

In 1969 Nixon also established a draft lottery system that eliminated many inequities and clarified the likelihood of being drafted. The days of the year were represented by the numbers 1 through 366 written on slips of paper. The slips were placed in separate plastic capsules that were mixed in a shoebox and then dumped into a deep glass jar. On December 1, 1969, capsules were drawn from the jar one at a time, and the birthdates were assigned lottery numbers as they were announced. All men of draft age (born 1944 to 1950) who shared a birthdate would be called to service at once. Overall, American males whose birthdates were among the first 195 drawn were called to service before the end of the war. In 1973 President Nixon did away with the draft altogether by creating an all-volunteer military. He was more successful in achieving the goal of reducing anti-war activity than at forcing concessions from the North Vietnamese in Paris.

Third, while reducing the number of American combat troops, Nixon and Kissinger actually expanded the air war in an effort to persuade the enemy to come to terms. In March, 1969 American planes began a 14-month-long bombing campaign aimed at Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. Congress did not learn of these secret raids until 1970, although the total tonnage of bombs dropped was four times that number dropped on Japan during World War II. Then on April 30, 1970, Nixon announced what he called an “incursion” into “neutral” Cambodia by American troops to “clean out” North Vietnamese staging areas. The head of Cambodia’s government for two decades, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, had previously objected to such American raids into his country. But he had been replaced in a *coup d’etat* by General Lon Nol earlier in the spring of 1970. This cleared the way for the American invasion.

The slow withdrawal of the United States from Vietnam had a devastating effect on the morale and reputation of the military. One soldier said, “No one wants to be the last grunt to die in this lousy war.” In 1969 the newspaper *GI Says* offered a bounty of \$10,000 for the murder of the officer who ordered the assault on “Hamburger Hill,” where 476 American soldiers had died to capture a position that was abandoned on the following day. Between 1969 and 1971 there were 730 reported “fragging” incidents, efforts to kill or injure officers, usually with fragmentation grenades. Even the old marching chants became cynical, as the troops shouted, “If I die in a combat zone, box me up, and ship me home,” while keeping cadence. Drug abuse became a major problem. In 1971 four times as many American troops were hospitalized for drug abuse as for combat-related wounds. One officer wrote, “In Vietnam the army is numbly extricating itself from a nightmare war...foisted on them by bright civilians who are now back on campus writing books about the folly of it all.”

American casualties dropped correspondingly to the withdrawal of American troops. But the killing in Vietnam continued. As Ellsworth Bunker, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam, noted cynically, it was just a matter of changing “the color of the bodies.”

Far from abating, however, the antiwar movement intensified. In November, 1969, half a million demonstrators staged a huge protest in Washington, D.C. Back on the home front, the American public learned of previously suppressed events in Vietnam that caused even the staunchest supporters of the war to wince. Late in 1969 the story of the My Lai massacre broke in the press and plunged the country into two years of exposure to the gruesome tale of Lieutenant William Calley, who had ordered the murder of over 200 civilians, including a large number of women and children, in My Lai village in March, 1968. The massacre was known only within the military until 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh broke the story and photos of the massacre appeared in *Life* magazine, discrediting the United States around the world. *Time* magazine observed that Americans “must stand in the larger dock of guilt and human conscience.” Twenty-five officers were charged with complicity in the massacre and subsequent cover-up. But only Calley was convicted. Nixon soon granted him parole.

Believing that Calley had been made a “fall guy” for official U.S. policies that inevitably brought death to innocent civilians, a group called Vietnam Veterans Against the War publicized other atrocities committed by American troops. In a controversial protest in 1971, they turned in their combat metals at demonstrations outside the U.S. Capitol. Supporters of the war called the veterans cowards and un-American, but their heartfelt protest exposed the deep personal torment that the war had caused many soldiers.

The loudest public outcry against the president's Indochina policy occurred in the wake of the Cambodian "incursion." In Nixon's television speech of April 30, 1970, he revealed the secret bombing campaign against North Vietnamese supply lines and the destruction of enemy bases by American troops in neutral Cambodia. The president said, "We will not be defeated...If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation...acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions throughout the world." Campuses across the country exploded in outrage in what the president of Columbia University called "the most disastrous month of May in the history of American higher education."

For the first time, students died. On May 4<sup>th</sup> at Kent State University, the Ohio National Guard was called in to quell rioting in which the campus Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) building was burned. The young Guardsmen panicked and opened fire on the demonstrators, killing four student bystanders and wounding eleven more. Less than two weeks later, on May 15<sup>th</sup>, Mississippi highway patrolmen stormed a dormitory at Jackson State College, riddled it with bullets, killing two black students. As a result, more than 450 colleges and universities closed down in protest. Across the nation, the spring semester was essentially canceled.

Although an official investigation of the Kent State episode condemned the "casual and indiscriminate shooting," polls indicated that the American public supported the National Guard and believed that students had "gotten what they were asking for." In New York City, antiwar demonstrators who gathered to protest the deaths at Kent State and the invasion of Cambodia were attacked by "hard-hat" construction workers, who forced the student protesters to disperse and then marched on City Hall to raise the flag that had been lowered to half staff in mourning for the Kent State victims.

During the following year in June, 1971, the *New York Times* began publishing excerpts from *The History of the U.S. Decision Making Process in Vietnam*, a secret Defense Department study commissioned by Robert McNamara before his resignation as secretary of defense in 1968. The so-called Pentagon Papers, leaked to the press by a former Defense Department official, Daniel Ellsberg, confirmed what many critics of the war had long suspected. Congress and the American people had not received the full story on the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964, and contingency plans for American entry into the war were being drawn up while President Johnson was promising the American people that combat troops would never be sent to Vietnam. Moreover, there was no plan for bringing the war to an end as long as the North Vietnamese persisted. Although the Pentagon Papers dealt with events only up to 1965, the Nixon administration attempted to block their publication, arguing that they endangered national security and that their publication would prolong the war. On June 30, 1971, by a vote of 6 to 3 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the government. Newspapers throughout the country began publication the next day.

Praised for his efforts to lessen Cold War tensions because of his negotiations with China and the Soviet Union, President Nixon also had tactical objectives in mind in 1972. He hoped that, by befriending both of 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 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 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<sup>th</sup>, 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 and easily defeated the Democrats’ nominee, Senator George McGovern of South Dakota. But the agreement was sabotaged by Thieu. Talks broke off in Paris on December 16<sup>th</sup>. 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 29<sup>th</sup>, and the resumption of talks in Paris soon followed. On January 27, 1973, the United States signed the Paris Peace Accords, 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. By the time a settlement was finally reached in 1973, another 20,000 Americans had died, the morale of the American army had been shattered, millions of additional Asians were killed or wounded, and fighting, in fact, continued in Southeast Asia. Overall, Nixon’s policy gained nothing he could not have accomplished in 1969.**

**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 the 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 in 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 2 million 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 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 unsuccessful 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."