

Redeployment from Vietnam

**Statement
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Hearing on Withdrawal from Afghanistan:
Historical Lessons**

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Background

Every war is different, but examination of past wars can often yield insights that are useful in dealing with later ones. Certainly consideration of the manner in which American forces were withdrawn from Vietnam while the fighting continued is worthwhile in those terms.

During the years when General William Westmoreland commanded MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, the top American headquarters)—June 1964 to June 1968—and in response to his repeated requests for more troops, the ground forces deployed reached well over half a million men (soldiers and marines), at the high water mark numbering 543,400.

In June 1968 General Creighton Abrams succeeded Westmoreland as commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, serving in that capacity for the next four years. During those years the forces under his command were progressively reduced, beginning in July 1969, with the final withdrawals occurring in late March 1973 in accordance with provisions of the Paris Accords.

The Schedule and Considerations

The Nixon administration came into office in January 1969, apparently with the expectation of being able to reach a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War within a few months. When this proved unattainable, President Nixon decided on incremental unilateral withdrawal of U.S. forces, coupling that with a program of increases and improvements in South Vietnamese military and paramilitary forces called “Vietnamization.” That approach was designed to en-

able the South Vietnamese to progressively assume more and more of the responsibility for their nation's security while the United States withdrew from a direct combat role but continued to provide financial and matériel support to the South Vietnamese.

Such support was essential if the South Vietnamese were going to be able to sustain their independence, since neither North nor South Vietnam had the capacity to arm or supply themselves with military wherewithal. Each depended on outside patrons, and North Vietnam was getting continuing (and later greatly increased) support from its communist backers, principally China and the Soviet Union.

At the Midway conference in June 1969, meeting with South Vietnamese President Thieu, President Nixon announced the first withdrawal increment, consisting of 25,000 U.S. troops, to be taken out during July and August 1969. (The troop withdrawals were called "redeployments," which did little to disguise their nature.)

Many commentators on the Vietnam War have written that the field command resisted these withdrawals, but that is not factual. Deputy Ambassador Sam Berger recalled that "Ambassador Bunker and General Abrams and I agreed that following Tet [1968] it was essential that the American presence be reduced as quickly as possible and that the Vietnamese be given every opportunity to develop with arms and equipment and training. After Tet it was impossible for us to stay there on the old basis, and that was fundamental."

The *MACV Objectives Plan* published by Abrams in 1969 included an assertion, labeled "the heart of the matter," that "the reduction of American forces is required, not simply as a ploy to 'buy' time, but also as a necessary method of compelling the South Vietnamese to take over the war. They must!"

The new Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, strongly supported U.S. troop withdrawals. And Laird, said his senior military assistant, Lieutenant General Robert Pursley, "felt he had a receptive audience in Abrams, and a supporting military commander for that line of strategy."

Matters were considerably complicated by the fact that Nixon and Laird had somewhat different outlooks on how the withdrawal should be accomplished. Laird aggressively pushed for the fastest possible withdrawal, whereas Nixon was more disposed to take troops out only as rapidly as necessary to pacify domestic opposition to the war. "I never was a great supporter of the Vietnam War,"

Laird told his biographer. "I was a great supporter of getting the hell out of there."

The initial planning for withdrawals was done on a "close hold" basis. Colonel Donn Starry served as principal planner, working directly for General Abrams, who told him: "It's going to happen whether you and I want it to happen or not. I do not want to be an obstructionist, but I do want it to be done in a way that does not completely bug out on the Vietnamese and leave them flat and unable to defend themselves."

Criteria for Successive Withdrawal Decisions

Early on the field command proposed three criteria to be applied in making decisions on the size and timing of successive withdrawal increments. These were improvements in South Vietnamese military capability, the level of battlefield activity, and progress in peace negotiations.

In the event, however, domestic political considerations became overriding and the withdrawal process took on a life of its own. President Nixon apparently decided that, to keep the anti-war faction relatively quiet, it was necessary to always have a next withdrawal increment announced and scheduled, regardless of the situation in South Vietnam.

Abrams told his senior associates he had "urged that we stick with 'cut and try,' " meaning that following each incremental withdrawal the results would be assessed before deciding on the magnitude and timing of the next increment, but that was not to be.

Abrams sought authority to determine what types of units, and what specific units, to include in each withdrawal increment in accordance with his judgment of what would be best for the South Vietnamese and, as the process went on, what would best enable him to provide security for the remaining Americans and give him the manpower and equipment needed to out-process subsequent increments when the time came. He was, for the most part, given that latitude.

In Vietnam the field command debated whether it would be better to construct succeeding withdrawal increments by taking out division-size slices and a related service support slice, or alternatively thinning out by brigade forces drawn from several locations. Briefing the matter to Abrams and the staff, Colonel Starry noted that "thinning

out does not get spaces, and spaces are the goal of these redeployments—at least as far as Washington sees it.” And, he added, “Also arguing against thinning out is that it tends to spread the risk evenly across a wide area. Instead of reassessing priorities and focusing on where the risk is least undesirable, it apportions a *degree* of risk to everyone, everywhere.” They decided on the division-size approach.

In these early stages the field command still hoped to have some influence on the timing of successive withdrawal increments. Said Colonel Starry: “There must be time for combined planning with the Vietnamese, for the orderly and progressive transfer of responsibilities for operational areas, for bases and facilities, for participation in pacification programs, and for all resources of the government of Vietnam to be brought to bear in a realistic manner on the problem with which they are about to be confronted.” Commented General Abrams: “What we’re trying to do on this is move it along so there *is* movement, but *not* create *panic*.”

A second increment of 40,500 was withdrawn during September-December 1969, bringing the total for that year to 65,500. In 1970 another 140,000 came out in three increments, then in 1971 four more increments totaling 160,000. Finally in 1972 a final five increments took out 157,000. That left approximately 20,900 (deducting the number already withdrawn from the peak deployment, but not accounting for understrength) to be brought out in late March 1973 in accordance with terms of the Paris Accords.

What those data show is a steady and reasonably even downward slope spread over a period of more than three years. During that same time extraordinary efforts were being made to improve South Vietnamese forces and governmental mechanisms across the board. Said William Colby, in charge of U.S. support for rural development, they were in a race to get the South Vietnamese army “up to speed” and “to get the country pacified before the soldiers are gone.”

To further complicate these tasks, no one knew how much time remained for accomplishing them. There loomed the possibility that some kind of an agreement in Paris would in short order terminate the involvement of outside forces, thus leaving the Vietnamese where they then were in terms of self-sufficiency. This forced continual compromises between doing things that would help in the immediate future and those that would have only longer-term, but more substantial, payoffs.

And, as early as November 1969, Secretary of Defense Laird specified that planning for the expanded and upgraded RVNAF would not include provision for a continuing U.S. support force. Everyone was going home.

The pressures from Washington were great, and went beyond even desires to pacify the anti-war movement and to cope with budgetary shortages. During a June 1970 visit to Vietnam Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor described another reality: "We've really already set the draft [future schedule and magnitude] on the assumption that there would be redeployments in that period...." It was, he emphasized, "too late to go back" and produce more manpower.

In Vietnam again in April 1971, Resor paid tribute to the enemy's ability to sway world opinion: "It might be fair to say he's in fact achieved the objective of getting us to withdraw ground troops fairly at a steady and significant rate. He's done that, of course, by the effect he's had in the United States, and that's what's caused it here."

In May 1971 Abrams described his current outlook to the staff: "This redeployment started out with various goals. We were going to be able to do them at a certain rate. And then, hell, almost before you get started, they wanted to accelerate it. Well, not only wanted to—*did*. That has a *hell* of an impact on logistics and personnel. Well, in the past we were *big* enough, and had enough people, so that you could wrench the thing in that way without causing a major disaster." For the past several months, though, we've had to look down into "the chasm." We are pulled two ways—support what's left and get out what has to get out. "There's an awful lot to be done, and if we're going to do it without *scandal*, and without the charges of abandonment, we've got to get in it."

Then a briefer, noting that Republic of Korea and Thai forces were also going to be withdrawing, discussed the looming competition for redeployment assets, especially ports. And, he said, closure and turnover of bases could be expected to saturate the RVNAF ability to accept and maintain them, with 750 sites—ranging from a five-man team house to a division base camp—to be turned over.

Said Abrams: "In this 184,000 that we have to get [down] to by the first of December [1971], it's a hell of a struggle to make sure that what's in that is what's going to be the most useful for South Vietnam." Thus: "We've got to get the tonnage out of here, and there's a lot of it. We've got to have a command and control element. We've got to have an advisory element. And we've got to have some kind of

support that sees to the mail and rations and hospitals for the Americans.”

As the process continued into early 1972, Abrams suggested that “maybe there comes a point, with the military, where you can’t have a *few* military. You’ve got to have *none*,” because the few would not have even the capability of sustaining themselves. “How much of a logistics tail did Lewis and Clark have?” he asked, provoking laughter.

At one point General William Rosson, deputy to General Abrams, said of the inexorable succession of withdrawals, without reference to the established criteria: “Well, of course we have gone on record as saying that this is *not* the way to *do* it.” Abrams (laughing): “Yes, and that’s been *disapproved*.”

As the withdrawal played out, its timing dictated largely by domestic political considerations, the South Vietnamese earned great credit for how well they managed to cope.

The Westmoreland Policy

During planning for the first withdrawal increment General Westmoreland, by then serving in Washington as Army Chief of Staff, had precipitated a crisis by insisting that withdrawals consist entirely of those troops who had been in Vietnam the longest, claiming that was the fair thing to do.

Abrams strongly favored redeploying units as units, sending them home intact with the people currently assigned.

The Westmoreland approach meant that there would have to be wholesale transfers of people in and out of redeploying units to repopulate them with only the longest-serving people.

That would be, quite obviously, the most disruptive thing that could be done to the remaining forces. Ripped apart by having all their most experienced people taken out, they were then reconstituted with a collection of individuals whose only shared attribute was relatively less time in Vietnam, a formula for destroying any semblance of unit cohesion. “Our fear was that the turbulence rate would be so high that units would become ineffective,” said Donn Starry. “And that’s what happened. I believe it caused most of the indiscipline in units which plagued us later.”

But Chief of Staff Westmoreland was able to prevail.

When the issue was finally decided Abrams and Starry, having worked the issue most of a night (Saigon and Washington being off-set thirteen hours in time), clearly foresaw the consequences. Remembered Colonel Starry (later a four-star general), Abrams “turned to me and said, ‘I probably won’t live to see the end of this, but the rest of your career will be dedicated to straightening out the mess this is going to create.’ How right he was.”

From the start the individual withdrawal policy caused enormous difficulties. Instead of sending back intact units, those troops who had been in Vietnam the longest were withdrawn from their various units, aggregated under the flag of a unit selected for redeployment, and sent home, thus stripping all the remaining units of their most experienced people. Meanwhile those left behind from the units withdrawn (because they were not among those with the longest service) were redistributed to the remaining units.

As this process was repeated over and over again (during successive withdrawals) the cohesion of existing units was progressively diluted, with effects extending even to the post-war Army. Said General Maxwell Thurman, who played a key role in the later rebuilding process, General Westmoreland’s “fair and equitable” redeployment policy was “a disaster.”

Problems for the Field Command

The field command experienced considerable difficulty handling the early withdrawal increments when there was confusion and controversy over whether the President’s announcements meant that, for example, the troop ceiling was being reduced by 25,000 men or, alternatively, 25,000 men were being taken out.

Since the field command was typically understrength throughout the process, taking out a specified number rather than reducing the ceiling perpetuated that understrength and exacerbated the difficulties.

Even while withdrawals were underway it was necessary, due to the one-year tour policy, to send a continuous stream of replacements for the men in units not yet withdrawn who were completing their Vietnam tours and returning home. The Army frequently fell short in providing the necessary number of replacements. This also exacerbated the effects of the drawdown.

While negotiations were underway about the size, composition, and timing of successive withdrawal increments, MACV was fighting yet another battle, one aimed at staving off budgetary decisions that would further curtail the forces available in Vietnam. The individual services, under intense pressure to reduce expenditures, were trying to bring some expensive units back from Vietnam. The Navy cut ships on the line by half, and Secretary Laird announced, without any prior coordination with MACV, that B-52 and tactical air sorties were being reduced. The Air Force reduced tactical fighter squadrons, yet another budget-driven decision.

The war was still a serious matter, as Abrams stressed to General Earle Wheeler (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and Admiral John McCain (Commander-in-Chief, Pacific), and he had no resources of his own. "The sum total of our combat power is what the services give us," said Abrams. "Quite frankly it makes my position as an operationally responsible commander in the field most difficult if the services proceed to carve out on their own my operational capability." Thus: "I ask only that I be consulted and given a chance as they, the services, begin to cut and run."

Effects on the South Vietnamese

A larger military establishment was essential if the South Vietnamese were to assume the full range of responsibilities from departing American and other allied forces, but expansion was not confined to the conventional RVNAF (Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces). Instead, it took place proportionally more, and probably more importantly, in the Territorial Forces (Regional Forces and Popular Forces) providing local security, with the Regional Forces under control of province chiefs and the Popular Forces answering to district chiefs.

As they grew in capability, these latter forces were incorporated into the regular military establishment, where they then constituted somewhat more than half of what eventually grew to an armed force of 1.1 million men (an increase of 400,000 since 1968). They provided the "hold" in the clear and hold approach adopted by Abrams in preference to the "search and destroy" tactics favored by his predecessor.

"Gradually, in their outlook, deportment, and combat performance," said South Vietnamese Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, "the RF and PF troopers shed their paramilitary origins and increasingly

became full-fledged soldiers.” So decidedly was this the case, Truong concluded, that “throughout the major period of the Vietnam conflict” the RF and PF were “aptly regarded as the mainstay of the war machinery.”

Thus expanded in numbers, and better equipped and better trained, the Territorial Forces came into their own, earning the respect of even so tough a critic as Lieutenant General Julian Ewell. “They were the cutting edge of the war,” he said admiringly.

Additional defensive capability was provided by four million members of a People’s Self-Defense Force, armed with some 600,000 weapons (which they shared), and more importantly constituting an overt commitment to the government in opposition to the enemy. President Thieu had authorized creation of this force over the objections of virtually all his advisors, saying “the government has to rest upon the support of the people, and it had little validity if it did not dare arm them.” His confidence was validated by the results.

In the earlier years of the war the South Vietnamese had been given relatively little in terms of combat support and modern equipment, neglect that affected their capabilities, their outlook, and their reputation. Finally South Vietnamese forces, both regular and territorial, began to recover from the effects of long-term neglect and to receive weaponry that was comparable to that issued to U.S. forces, and indeed comparable to that long employed by the enemy.

“You’ve got to face it,” Abrams told his senior associates, “the Vietnamese have been given the lowest priority of anybody that’s fighting in this country! And that’s what we’re trying to correct.”

The tasks facing the South Vietnamese as U.S. forces withdrew was formidable indeed. Secretary of Defense Laird described it in a November 1969 statement before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “When the present administration took office, a program of upgrading the training and equipment of South Vietnamese forces had begun. The goal of this program, however, was limited to increasing the combat capability of the forces of the Republic of Vietnam to the level needed to defeat the Viet Cong once all North Vietnamese forces had been withdrawn from the south. The Nixon administration early this year worked out a new objective with the government of South Vietnam for the training and equipping of the armed forces of South Vietnam. The objective we set was attainment by the South Vietnamese of a level of combat capability which would be adequate to defeat not only the Viet Cong, but the invading North Vietnamese as well.”

General Abrams saw the evolving situation for what it was, with the South Vietnamese being asked to vault higher and higher hurdles. "We started out in 1968," he recalled. "We were going to get these people by 1974 where they could whip hell out of the VC—the VC. Then they changed the goal to lick the VC and the NVA—in South Vietnam. Then they compressed it. They've compressed it about three times, or four times—acceleration."

"So what we started out with to be over this kind of time"—indicating with his hands a long time—"is now going to be over this kind of time"—much shorter. "And if it's VC, NVA, interdiction, helping Cambodians and so on—that's what we're working with. And," Abrams cautioned, "you have to be careful on a thing like this, or you'll get the impression you're being screwed. You mustn't *do* that, 'cause it'll get you mad."

But Abrams, always sympathetic, was also realistic. "Sooner or later the Vietnamese themselves have got to settle this thing," he acknowledged. "We can only help, and we can only help so much."

The 1972 Easter Offensive

The PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Army) history of the war reveals that "the combat plan for 1972" had as its stated goal "to gain decisive victory in 1972, and to force the U.S. imperialists to negotiate an end to the war from a position of defeat."

When, in late March of 1972, the enemy mounted a conventional invasion of South Vietnam by the equivalent of twenty divisions, a bloody pitched battle ensued. The enemy's "well-planned campaign" was defeated, wrote Douglas Pike, "because air power prevented massing of forces and because of stubborn, even heroic, South Vietnamese defense. Terrible punishment was visited on PAVN troops and on the PAVN transportation system and communication matrix." But, most important of all, "ARVN troops and even local forces stood and fought as never before."

Later critics said that South Vietnam had thrown back the invaders only because of American air support. Abrams responded vigorously to that. "I *doubt* the fabric of this thing could have been held together without U.S. air," he told his commanders. "But the thing that had to happen before that is the Vietnamese, some numbers of

them, had to stand and fight. If they didn't do that, *ten times* the air we've got wouldn't have stopped them."

South Vietnam's defenders inflicted such casualties on the invaders that it was three years before North Vietnam could mount another major offensive. By then, of course, dramatic changes had taken place in the larger context.

The Paris Accords

In late January 1973 the Paris Accords, theoretically bringing an end to the fighting in Vietnam, were signed. To induce the South Vietnamese to agree to the terms, viewed by them as fatally flawed in that they allowed the North Vietnamese to retain large forces in the South while Americans and other allies of the South Vietnamese were required to depart, President Nixon told President Thieu that if North Vietnam violated the terms of the agreement and resumed its aggression against the South, the United States would intervene militarily to punish them for that.

And, said Nixon, if renewed fighting broke out, the United States would replace on a one-for-one basis major combat systems (tanks, artillery pieces, aircraft) lost by the South Vietnamese, as was permitted by terms of the Paris Accords. And finally, said Nixon, the United States would continue robust financial support for South Vietnam. (In the event, the United States defaulted on all three of these commitments.)

Provisions of the Paris Accords notwithstanding, North Vietnamese aggression against the South continued. The South Vietnamese fought valiantly, taking heavy casualties but essentially holding their own, until the United States compounded their problems by defaulting on promises to continue providing essential matériel and financial support. Meanwhile the North Vietnamese were getting greatly increased support from their communist patrons. Given that disparity, defeat was inevitable. Cabled Tom Polgar, the last CIA Chief of Station, Saigon: "Ultimate outcome hardly in doubt, because South Vietnam cannot survive without U.S. military aid as long as North Vietnam's war-making capacity is unimpaired and supported by Soviet Union and China."

Some Conclusions

Examination of the Vietnam experience suggests that, at least from the standpoint of the field commander, a viable withdrawal of forces from an active combat theater would include these characteristics:

- + The field command is permitted to determine the composition of withdrawal elements so as to maintain a balance amongst operational capability, security for those elements remaining, and the capacity for outloading subsequent departing elements.**
- + Criteria for decisions about the size and timing of successive withdrawal increments are in place and consistently applied throughout the withdrawal process.**
- + Those criteria typically include progress in developing indigenous forces, progress in peace negotiations, and consideration of the level of enemy activity.**
- + Withdrawing elements are constituted by unit, not individuals.**

As I suggested at the outset, every war is different, but examination of past wars can be useful in deciding how to conduct later ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer these observations on the Vietnam experience.