At 2.45 a.m. on 30 January 1968, a team of NLF cadres blasted a hole in the wall surrounding the US Embassy in Saigon and dashed into the courtyard of the compound. For the next six hours, this potent symbol of the US presence in southern Vietnam was the scene of one of the most dramatic episodes of the American war in Vietnam. Unable to get through the heavy door at the main entrance of the Embassy building, the attackers retreated into the courtyard and took cover behind large concrete flowerpots, pounding the building with rockets and exchanging gunfire with a small detachment of military police. They held their positions until 9.15 a.m., when they were finally overpowered. All nineteen of the NLF cadres were killed or severely wounded. The attack on the American Embassy was a part of the Tet Offensive of 1968, known colloquially in Vietnam as Tet Mau Than, a massive coordinated assault by North Vietnamese and NLF forces against the South Vietnamese government and their American allies in major urban areas and the countryside aimed at bringing victory in the American war.

It did not, in 1968. Seven years would pass before the war came to an end. But in the wake of the Tet Offensive, the dynamics of the American war profoundly changed. Despite the spectacle of the NLF attack on the US Embassy, the Front emerged from the offensive far weaker in both the political and military spheres than it had been throughout most of the 1960s. An ever deepening war-weariness in the South cut against subsequent efforts to rebuild its forces. After Tet the North Vietnamese army provided the military muscle for the southern communist insurgency in a struggle that
would more and more pivot on conventional military battles rather than guerrilla warfare.

But who the northern army would face on the battlefield, and where, was also in flux. Notwithstanding its devastating impact on the NLF, the psychological shock of the Tet Offensive dramatically shifted American policy towards the war in Vietnam. US military forces in South Vietnam, which had reached their peak in 1967, were slowly drawn down. In their place the South Vietnamese army, whose troop strength reached over 1 million by 1972, would face North Vietnamese and NLF forces, backed by massive US airpower along with continuing and substantial military aid and assistance. The geographical contours of the war also grew wider, drawing in both neighbouring Cambodia and Laos, which experienced some of the most sustained and devastating US bombing campaigns of the American war. Efforts intensified, too, after Tet to find a negotiated settlement to the war in a process shaped by a larger transformation in relations between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. The diplomatic search for peace, however, brought the North Vietnamese into more acrimonious conflict with their Soviet and Chinese allies, strained the already fraying bonds of the US–South Vietnamese relationship, and ultimately produced a settlement that marked no more than a pause in the fighting.

When military victory came for North Vietnam in April 1975, far more quickly than it had anticipated, its three-decade struggle for national liberation against France and the United States was at an end. But the twin goal of socialist revolution in a reunified Vietnam proved more difficult to realize. The shifting dynamics of the American war after Tet shaped not only the war’s end but also the sometimes contradictory and surprising dimensions of the post-war peace.

The Tet Offensive

The decision to launch a general offensive in the South emerged through vigorous debates among the top Hanoi leadership in 1967. During the French war, the DRV had seen the larger path to victory through a Marxist lens as a three-stage process that moved from defence to equilibrium and finally to a general offensive. For many in the party and state the American war appeared to be entering into a stage of equilibrium (sam au) in 1967, though one they defined somewhat differently than they had in the past when such judgements rested on a sense of the numerical superiority of their own forces. The party leadership was aware of their own setbacks on the ground in the South since the introduction of American ground forces, and that more could come. They also acknowledged the continuing imbalance in firepower and numbers of regular troops on the ground between the two sides. But Hanoi believed that the inability of the American search-and-destroy missions and bombing campaigns to alter decisively the dynamics of the war, a growing domestic opposition to the war in the United States, and the continuing weaknesses of the South Vietnamese state offered promising openings to exploit the enemy’s vulnerabilities. The time had come ‘to prepare quickly on all fronts to seize the opportunity to achieve a large victory and force America to accept a military defeat’ through a major military offensive and a popular uprising throughout southern Vietnam, what officially became known as the General Offensive and General Uprising (Tong con kichi, Tong khoi nghièng).¹

The strategic and tactical contours of the offensive, however, were hotly contested, shaped by differing visions of how to fight the American war and by the complexities of Hanoi’s relationship with its Soviet and Chinese allies. General Nguyen Chi Thanh, the commander of military operations in the South, urged the adoption of the strategy of high-level confrontation that had informed his aggressive policies since 1965 of engaging American and South Vietnamese troops in conventional battles with main-force units. As General Thanh wrote in early 1967, ‘To attack unremittingly is the most active and most effective method to maintain and extend our control over the battlefield.’² But when Thanh’s tactics began to produce exceptionally high casualties and failed to shift decisively the balance of military forces in the South, powerful forces within
the DRV, including the defence minister and general in command of the northern army Vo Nguyen Giap, raised serious questions about the efficacy of big-unit warfare. Giap saw the war in the South as a protracted people’s war, emphasizing that it could take as many as fifteen to twenty years to achieve victory and strongly advocating guerrilla warfare along with regular units and conventional battles.3

These internal debates were complicated by competing pressures from the Soviet Union and China as the tensions of the Sino-Soviet split intensified. The Soviets, who provided anti-aircraft artillery and heavy weapons critical to fighting the Americans and whose level of military and economic aid would shortly exceed those of China, urged the Vietnamese to fight a more conventional war. For their part the Chinese, who controlled the transport logistics for both Chinese and Soviet aid and provided 320,000 troops to man engineering and anti-aircraft units in the North, urged the Vietnamese to follow a Maoist-style protracted guerrilla war. The Chinese also feared that a large-scale offensive would further increase North Vietnamese dependence on the Soviets for military aid and weapons. As Mao told Vo Nguyen Giap at a meeting in Beijing in early 1967,

We have a saying: ‘if you preserve the mountain green, you will never have to worry about firewood.’ The U.S. is afraid of your tactics. They wish that you would order your regular forces to fight, so they can destroy your main forces. But you were not deceived. Fighting a war of attrition is like having meals: [it is best] not to have too big a bite.4

The incremental and improvisational planning for Tet reflected these internal and external divisions. Nguyen Chi Thanh’s aggressive approach to the general offensive was scaled back in the early summer of 1967, when a decision was made to rely more on southern-based NLF troops rather than on those from the North Vietnamese army and to put limits on where attacks in the South would take place. Thanh’s sudden death in early July prompted a further scaling back of plans for the military offensive. At the same time, plans moved forward to foment a general popular uprising in the South, although they were communicated to southern NLF cadres in piecemeal and sometimes confusing ways. Throughout the fall of 1967, the North Vietnamese undertook a series of diversionary military moves in an effort to make the Tet Offensive a surprise. They attacked along the Cambodian border, the central highlands, and the demilitarized zone that separated North and South Vietnam to convince the Americans and the South Vietnamese government that Hanoi was intent on seizing the northern sectors of South Vietnam. The North also began to move troops into place near Khe Sanh, in the north-west near the Lao border, hoping to draw American troops out of southern cities and make urban centres more vulnerable to attack during Tet. Reports of these troop movements did alarm American observers, who feared Khe Sanh might be another Dien Bien Phu. President Johnson in fact had a scale model of Khe Sanh built for the White House situation room so that he could follow developments closely. The Americans redeployed as many as 50,000 troops from urban centres to Khe Sanh and the northern border region, weakening the defences of South Vietnamese cities in the way in which Hanoi had hoped. North Vietnamese troops initiated the battle of Khe Sanh on 21 January 1968, nine days before the beginning of the Tet Offensive, in what became one of the bloodiest battles of the American war, though ultimately of little consequence for the war’s resolution.5

As North Vietnamese soldiers were put into place near Khe Sanh, planning for the Tet Offensive and the popular uprising continued. The timing of the offensive was carefully chosen, consciously drawing on a military tactic used by the Vietnamese in a late eighteenth-century battle against the Chinese. Tet is the Vietnamese lunar New Year, the most important holiday in Vietnam, when almost all work in the country comes to halt for a week of familial celebrations with many travelling back to their home villages. Throughout the war, both sides had honoured a ceasefire during Tet. Using the holiday, when ARVN was at half strength as so many soldiers had Tet leave to return home to their families, introduced a critical element of surprise. The cacophony of
firecrackers and fireworks that herald the beginning of the New Year also provided useful cover for the gunfire that opened the Tet Offensive. On 30 January 1968 communist forces, mainly local units of the National Liberation Front's PLAF, attacked thirty-six of South Vietnam's forty-six provinces, sixty-four of the 242 district capitals, five of the South's largest cities, and countless numbers of hamlets and villages. In Saigon NLF units attacked Tan Son Nhat airport, the headquarters of South Vietnam's general staff and the presidential palace.

Just as Vietnamese willingness to engage in battle during lunar New Year had surprised the Chinese two centuries before, the Tet Offensive caught South Vietnam and the Americans off guard. But once the initial shock had passed, they quickly recovered. Most of the attacks in urban areas were reversed in three to four days, and the hope of a general uprising in the cities was quickly forestalled. Communist forces did hold the former imperial capital of Hue until late February. The liberation of that city involved intensive artillery fire, heavy bombing, and savage street fighting, which produced a huge number of civilian casualties and as many as 100,000 refugees. In its aftermath the bodies of 2,800 South Vietnamese who had been executed by NLF and North Vietnamese forces were discovered in mass graves in and around Hue, suggesting the communist insurgency was as capable as the United States and the South Vietnamese of using terror as an instrument of war. Popular uprisings did take place in the rural south, often with considerable enthusiasm from local populations, but NLF forces had to abandon many of their victories in the villages to meet continuing demands by Tet's planners in Hanoi to push back militarily in cities and towns.

The offensive was a major military defeat for the North and the NLF. Much of the Front's civilian infrastructure and military forces was destroyed in the fierce fighting during and after the offensive. The NLF lost 80 per cent of its fighting force, suffering as many as 30,000 casualties. Political cadres, particularly those in urban areas, came out from under cover to lead the failed general uprising, and many were subsequently arrested. Hanoi's insistence on high-level confrontation throughout 1968 further increased NLF losses. If rural support for the general uprising was initially widespread, many cadres returned to their villages and refused to fight when it became clear that Tet-induced hopes of the fall of the South Vietnamese regime had not materialized. In the remaining years of the American war, the NLF was less able than in the past to mobilize effectively the local population in the South, who were even more dispirited by the war after Tet. Recruitment efforts faltered as the Front was no longer seen as a desirable route of advancement for rural youth, reflected in the shrinkage in the numbers of NLF cadres from as many as 250,000 in 1968 to some 197,000 in 1971. In the aftermath of the offensive, General Tran Van Tra, who commanded PLAF forces in the Binh theatre north and north-west of Saigon during Tet, wrote: 'we suffered large sacrifices and losses with regard to manpower and matériel, did not correctly evaluate the specific balance of forces between ourselves and the enemy, and did not fully realize that the enemy still had considerable capabilities and that our capabilities were limited. . . . [We] set requirements that were beyond our strength.'

But if Tet fell short of its most ambitious goals, it did fundamentally alter the nature of the American war. The psychological shock of the Tet attacks throughout southern Vietnam undermined the frequent promises of General William Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam, that he could see 'the light at the end of the tunnel'. The gap between rhetoric and reality in the early days of the offensive astounded and outraged many Americans, so much so that President Johnson felt compelled to quit his re-election campaign in the aftermath of Tet. Even after American and South Vietnamese forces rallied to defeat the offensive, Tet proved to be a turning point in US perceptions and policy towards the war. Support for the war and the American relationship with the South Vietnamese government began to unravel. As the former secretary of state Dean Acheson told President Johnson in a meeting in late March 1968, 'We can no longer do the job we set out to do in the time we have left and we must begin to take steps to disengage.' Public opinion polls in the wake of Tet
revealed that a clear majority of Americans believed the United States wasn't making progress in the war in Vietnam. In the tumultuous political year of 1968, which eventually brought Richard Nixon to the presidency, US policy moved from visions of possible military victory in Vietnam to a far more ambiguous sense of the direction the endgame might take. Tet also shifted the subsequent military dynamics of the war on the communist side. Only a limited number of North Vietnamese troops were engaged in the offensive, with many units held in reserve pending a favourable outcome on the ground. As such, NLF forces bore the brunt of the casualties during the offensive and in its aftermath. The severe reduction in the numbers of NLF troops and faltering efforts at rural mobilization meant that North Vietnamese troops took over the fighting for much of the rest of the American war, and conventional rather than guerrilla warfare became the norm.

A Shifting War

Richard Nixon came to the White House in 1969 with what he had promised during the 1968 election campaign was a secret plan to win the war. That such a plan actually existed during the campaign itself appears unlikely, but once in office Nixon and his national security adviser Henry Kissinger quickly introduced a series of policies to build up the South Vietnamese state and widen the geographical parameters of the conflict aimed at challenging North Vietnam's increasing dominance on the ground in the South. Recognizing American war-weariness and the growing power of the anti-war movement, Nixon embraced a policy of Vietnamization that reflected a persistent American belief that it was the United States who would make South Vietnam Vietnamese. In June 1969 he announced the withdrawal of 25,000 US ground troops; American troop levels fell to 475,000 at the end of 1969 and 140,000 by the end of 1971. As the administration shifted responsibility for fighting the war to the South Vietnamese, it significantly increased military and economic assistance to the Saigon government. The level of ARVN forces, about 850,000 when Nixon took office, increased rapidly to over 1 million. The US turned over huge quantities of weapons to South Vietnam, including more than a million M16 rifles as well as machine guns, grenade launchers, and heavy mortars and howitzers. The South Vietnamese were also given large numbers of ships, planes, helicopters, and military vehicles. Military schools were expanded to a capacity of more than 100,000 students per year, and efforts were made to improve ARVN morale by raising pay scales, expanding veterans' benefits, and improving conditions in military camps.

The impact of Vietnamization in Vietnam was ambiguous. By 1970 it was in full swing and most observers agreed that some gains had been made. Almost overnight ARVN had become one of the largest and best-equipped armies in the world. When properly led, ARVN units could fight well, and some American advisers noted that perhaps out of necessity ARVN performance began to improve as US support units were withdrawn. But if on paper ARVN was a formidable force, many of its fundamental weaknesses persisted. The process of 'ghosting', by which the names of dead and deserted soldiers were kept on pay rosters so that the officer in charge could pocket the pay, ran as high as 20 per cent. Desertion remained a chronic problem, as was the severe shortage of qualified, competent, and honest officers at all levels. Even the stronger ARVN units sometimes manifested an unwillingness to engage the enemy in sustained combat, prompting American military advisers to question if the South Vietnamese army would ever become aggressive enough to counter the highly motivated troops of the PLA and PAVN. Many in the ARVN feared that Vietnamization was the prelude to the full withdrawal of US support for South Vietnam. As one ARVN officer recalled, 'Many of us believe the U.S. was simply giving up, that Washington had set us on this course and was now abandoning us in our hour of greatest need.' The commitment of American ground troops to the war effort also weakened after Vietnamization. With the purposes of the war increasingly murky, US forces were less willing to put their lives on the line than they had earlier in the American war. Unit discipline broke down, attempts to assassinate officers, or what was termed 'fragging', rose
sharply (more than 200 incidents were reported in 1970), drug abuse became more common, and outbreaks of racial incidents between African American and white soldiers grew more numerous.9

Along with Vietnamization, Nixon’s policy towards South Vietnam also sought to accelerate the battle for ‘hearts and minds’, or pacification, of the rural population. Pacification was not a new strategy; it had been central to the Diem era policies of agrovilles and strategic hamlets and his Denounce the Communists campaign. American critics of the big-unit warfare that formed the core of US military strategy in Vietnam since 1965 had long argued that what was really needed was a sustained effort to break the hold of the NLF in the countryside. Pacification efforts expanded under the Johnson administration in the wake of the Tet Offensive, but they further accelerated with the coming of Vietnamization. ARVN forces assigned to improving village security were expanded to half a million men, whose efforts were supplemented by enlarged village militias. Projects to clear roads, repair bridges, and establish schools and hospitals were launched, as were new programmes to expand agricultural production, including the distribution of new, higher-yield ‘miracle rice’ and technology that improved planting, threshing, and irrigation. Americans also pushed the South Vietnamese government to undertake rural reforms, including the restoration of village elections in 1969 and an ambitious land to the Tiller land reform programme in 1970.10

Critical to the Nixon pacification campaign were efforts to identify and destroy the NLF infrastructure in the South through the Phoenix programme. In theory, this American-directed programme sought to gather intelligence on Front cadres which would then be given to the South Vietnamese military, who, in the language of the day, could ‘neutralize’ the cadre. In practice this meant getting him or her to rally to the side of the South Vietnamese government, or face imprisonment and sometimes death. In its implementation, the programme was plagued by many of the problems that had impeded US and South Vietnamese efforts to force a collapse of the NLF. For instance, the intelligence that Phoenix uncovered on the Front was not always accurate. To have any hope of success, the programme needed to identify high-level cadres that controlled the NLF’s organizational structure. Several factors made that difficult: the most important cadres were heavily protected and increasingly lived in sanctuaries on the Cambodian side of the Vietnamese border; widespread popular fear of NLF retribution on informants; and the prevalence of intra-villages rivalries and feuds that sometimes prompted people to put forward names of people who had little if nothing to do with the Front. There were also problems on the American side. Six-month rotations and one-year tours of duty for American military personnel meant there was little time to accumulate the knowledge of local conditions necessary for effective intelligence-gathering. Because few US soldiers spoke Vietnamese, they had to rely on ARVN interpreters, who generally came from provinces far from where their units were operating and had little first-hand knowledge of local conditions. The uses to which this limited and sometimes faulty intelligence was put also hindered efforts to break the NLF. Rivalries between the ARVN, the national police, and local forces limited success, as did the workings on the ground of a quota system set up as an incentive to kill or capture NLF cadres. Low-level cadres were easier to locate and filled most of the quotas, whereas high-level cadres whose capture was more significant continued to go free. Still, NLF cadres acknowledged that in some areas the Phoenix programme was ‘dangerously effective’.11

Without question the NLF was weaker in the southern countryside by 1972 than it had been in 1968, though less because of Vietnamization and American-led pacification than because of the decimation of the Front’s military forces in the Tet Offensive and the capture of the many formerly underground NLF cadres who had surfaced to lead the failed general uprising. The rural south was quieter and safer for peasants as the shift to more conventional warfare after 1968 left them increasingly alone and freer to engage in the rhythms of the household agricultural cycle. But if the American war began to feel different for rural Vietnamese, these new sensibilities did not necessarily translate into support for the
South Vietnamese Nguyen Van Thieu government. Thieu’s land reform in 1969, though more far-reaching than efforts in the Diem period, did little more than recognize land titles the NLF had given out in the 1950s and 1960s. Many Vietnamese peasants remained exhausted by the war, retreating into their family lives and seeking to avoid the political realm altogether.  

If the situation in South Vietnam was somewhat calmer, under the Nixon administration the American war expanded with ferocity into neighboring Cambodia and Laos. In March 1969 Nixon ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia. Over the next fifteen months some 3,000 B-52 raids were flown, dropping more than 100,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia. The operation was dubbed, with singular inappropriateness, Menu, and its individual components Breakfast, Lunch, Supper, Dinner, Dessert, and Snack. The bombing also took place in Laos, with the Lunch strikes directed at the Lao-Cambodian border. A separate campaign from 1969 to 1973 pushed deeper into Laos, with almost 1.5 million tons of bombs dropped. In bombing Cambodia and Laos, Nixon was intent upon destroying the supply lines North Vietnam used to infiltrate troops and supplies to southern Vietnam through the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail, which crossed into both Cambodia and Laos along the Vietnamese border, had been transformed by the late 1960s from a relatively primitive set of jungle trails to a dense network of carefully maintained roads and bridges that could accommodate bicycles and military vehicles carrying as many as 5,000 soldiers each month and 400 tons of supplies each week into South Vietnam. The Nixon administration believed the most important target was the Central Office for Southern Vietnam (COSVN), located just inside Cambodia’s border with South Vietnam, which directed the communist war effort in the South. Two other dimensions of Nixon war strategy shaped its planning for these unprecedented bombing campaigns. At a time of Vietnamization, extending the war into Cambodia and Laos was seen as demonstrating a continuing seriousness on the part of the United States in the American war. The bombing was also the first example of what Nixon termed his ‘madman theory’, a willingness to use savage force to keep North Vietnam guessing about American intentions that Nixon believed marked a sharp departure from Johnson’s more gradualist approach to the war.  

Despite the massive bombing, COSVN proved an elusive target, and in April 1970 Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia, sending in 90,000 US ground troops and 40,000 ARVN forces in what was a major geographical expansion of the American war. The invasion set off a firestorm of controversy in the United States, pushing the fervor of the anti-war movement to new heights and prompting increasingly vocal Congressional opposition to Nixon’s policy in Vietnam. The bombing and invasion did disrupt northern supply lines, though not enough to change the direction of the war. COSVN itself was never decisively hit, in large measure because the Nixon administration’s perception of COSVN as a jungle version of the US Pentagon obscured the reality of it as a series of impermanent makeshift huts that was more about the people who inhabited them than about the place itself. When US intelligence did pinpoint COSVN’s position, Soviet intelligence was often able to get warnings to the North and the NLF about American intentions. One NLF official who experienced the fierce bombings described their impact in this way:

We were awakened by the familiar thunder—nearer now than it had been in recent days. . . . as the cataclysm walked in on us, everybody hugged the earth—some screaming quietly, others struggling to suppress attacks of violent, involuntary trembling. Around us the ground began to heave spasmodically, and we were engulfed in a monstrous roar. Then, abruptly, it stopped. . . . The last of the bomb craters had opened up less than a kilometer away. Again, miraculously, no one had been hurt . . . spirits began to revive. COSVN’s Pham Hung and General Trung joked that ‘Even though we ran like hell, still we’ll win,’ sentiments that Henry Kissinger anticipated in his 1968 Foreign Affairs article: ‘Guerrillas win if they don’t lose. A standard army loses if it does not win.’  

If the American bombing and invasion left the NLF command and the Ho Chi Minh Trail largely intact, it did set in motion a destabilizing set of developments within Cambodia itself. Cambodia had preserved a precarious decade-long neutrality in
the American war. Norodom Sihanouk, the neutralist leader of Cambodia, turned a blind eye to the North Vietnamese and NLF use of Cambodian territory in the 1960s, and the Johnson administration, worried about the dangers of an escalating war, largely prohibited attacks on Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. Nixon’s attitudes towards Cambodia marked a clear shift in policy, and Sihanouk vehemently protested Nixon’s secret bombing. In March 1970, a month before the American invasion of Cambodia, Sihanouk was overthrown in a military coup, whose pro-American leaders demanded the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from Cambodian soil. Although the extent of US involvement in the coup remains a matter of debate, the hopelessly inept and extremely weak regime received strong American backing and drew an even more chaotic Cambodia directly into the American war. North Vietnamese and NLF troops drove deeper into the Cambodian countryside in the wake of the US bombing and invasion. There they began to work in an often acrimonious partnership with the Cambodian Communist Party, better known as the Khmer Rouge, who under Pol Pot would establish a genocidal regime in the country after 1975. Scholars of modern Cambodian history contend that popular support for the Khmer Rouge before the American intervention in Cambodia was very limited. They argue that the American bombing campaign, which killed as many as 150,000 Cambodian civilians, was critical in drawing ordinary Cambodians into the arms of the revolutionary movement.15

The American war also spread to neighbouring Laos. Between 1960 and 1974 the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had maintained a secret army of 30,000 Hmong tribesmen in mountainous northern Laos to fight against a Lao communist insurgency. An upland people whose economy was dominated by subsistence agriculture, the Hmong had become involved in the cultivation of opium during the period of French colonial rule. To encourage the Hmong leadership to provide a mercenary army for the CIA, the Agency used its clandestine air network to transport Hmong opium for sale on the world drug market.16 As the war escalated in Cambodia, this low-level insurgency and the beginnings of massive US bombing in Laos were augmented by the use of ARVN troops in direct fighting near the Lao border. In the Lao Son 719 campaign of February 1971, one of the first major tests of Vietnamization, US military planners sought to thwart an expected North Vietnamese drive into the South using the portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail that ran through the Lao panhandle. A Congressional amendment passed after the Cambodian invasion barred US ground troops from entering either Cambodia or Laos, so the Lao Son campaign had to be run using ARVN troops backed by US air support. Plans for the campaign, however, were leaked to Hanoi well before the attack and what was intended to be a surprise turned out to be a major ARVN defeat. At the beginning of February, South Vietnam sent 17,000 of the ARVN’s best troops into southern Laos. Almost immediately, President Thieu issued secret instructions to halt the offensive if 3,000 men became incapacitated. When ARVN losses mounted, Thieu ordered a retreat without informing US military commanders. At this point only massive American air support prevented a complete disaster for the badly coordinated and frightened elite ARVN units. Even so, more than 9,000 ARVN troops were killed or wounded with many US Army helicopters and planes destroyed or damaged. Nixon administration assertions that the ARVN had conducted an ‘orderly retreat’ were belied by the haste and confusion which marked the withdrawal from Laos and revealed the very limited gains that the policies of an expanded war and Vietnamization had brought for the Americans and the South Vietnamese.17

The War for Peace

Prior to the Tet Offensive neither Washington nor Hanoi had been especially keen on a negotiated settlement to the American war in Vietnam. The United States rejected European efforts to promote the neutralization of South Vietnam before the massive American escalation in 1965, as they did attempts by the United Nations and France to bring North Vietnam and the US into diplomatic contact when war broke out. Hanoi was pressed by its Soviet and Chinese
ally in very different directions on negotiations. The Soviets, who saw the American war as an impediment to a desired relaxation of tensions with the United States, increasingly favoured negotiations, while the Chinese, then in the most radical phase of the Cultural Revolution and opposed to any accommodation with the West, strongly opposed them. Given Hanoi’s reliance on military and economic support from both parties, these very differing Soviet and Chinese views weighed heavily on the North Vietnamese leadership. Somewhat to American surprise, they responded favourably to the Johnson administration’s offer to open negotiations in Paris in March 1968.

Formal talks opened in Paris in May. Though they quickly reached stalemate, the very decision to engage in negotiations prompted renewed strains in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. In a heated meeting in Beijing in October between Chen Yi, China’s vice-premier and foreign minister, and Le Duc Tho, the North’s chief negotiator with the US in Paris, both sides accused the other of making basic errors in handling negotiations with the Americans, highlighting persisting Vietnamese bitterness over Chinese pressures to accept the Geneva settlement that had brought an end to the French war. Chen Yi told Le Duc Tho, ‘you have accepted the compromising and capitulationist proposals put forward by the Soviet revisionists . . . now the cause is more difficult and the price for victory more expensive’, prompting an acrimonious exchange, in which Le Duc Tho replied:

we will wait and see. And the reality will give us the answer. We have gained experience over fifteen years. Let reality justify . . . We signed the Geneva accords in 1954 when the US did not agree to do so. We withdrew our armed forces from the South to the North, thus letting people in the South be killed. . . . Because we listened to your advice.

Chen Yi countered:

You just mentioned that in the Geneva conference, you made a mistake because you followed our advice. But this time, you will make another mistake if you do not take our words into account.  

In fact the northern leadership was closer to the Chinese view than these tense exchanges suggest. They had agreed to the Paris talks with little interest in substantive negotiation, viewing the meetings as the diplomatic dimension of the broader political and military struggle, or what the North termed ‘negotiating while fighting, fighting while negotiating’.

President Thieu of South Vietnam also sought to stall the negotiations before the US presidential election in November, believing if Richard Nixon won he would be a more reliable negotiating partner. He recognized the dangers negotiation posed to the viability of the South Vietnamese state, telling Johnson in October: ‘You are powerful. You can say to a small nation what you want . . . but you cannot force us to do anything against our interests. This negotiation is not a life and death matter for the U.S., but it is for Vietnam.’ Thieu only agreed to send representatives to Paris after Nixon’s election victory. In what became known as the battle of the tables, Thieu signalled his intransigence by refusing to agree to the shape of the negotiating table. After considerable back and forth, the Americans, who preferred two rectangular tables, and the North Vietnamese, who advocated a square table, acquiesced to a round table, which would privilege none of the four parties to the talks, which, along with the US and North Vietnam, included South Vietnam and the NLF’s Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). Thieu had opposed seating the PRG at all, fearful it would accord greater legitimacy to the Front. But after agreeing to their presence in Paris, he refused to have South Vietnam’s representative sit next to or across the table from the PRG or Hanoi. The round table was out. Throughout most of December 1968 American negotiators floated a creative series of geometric shapes. With reluctance, both Thieu and Hanoi ultimately agreed to a round table placed between two rectangular tables. The peace talks were not going well.

More substantively, there was a yawning gap between the North Vietnamese and US negotiating positions. Hanoi wanted the US to withdraw fully from South Vietnam and to have the Thieu
government replaced by a coalition that included the NLF. For its part, Washington sought an agreement that provided for the mutual withdrawal of forces, both US and North Vietnamese, and refused to talk of replacing the South Vietnamese government. None of the efforts of the Nixon administration in 1969 to break the diplomatic stalemate—opening a secret negotiating track with the North Vietnamese, escalating the war through the savage bombing of Cambodia, and threatening even more massive American bombing in northern Vietnam—forced North Vietnam’s hand. Perceptions of the persisting weakness of the South Vietnamese state, their own fears about the waning post-Tet fortunes of the NLF, and China’s continuing pressure to resist settlement combined to shape the resolve of North Vietnam to avoid compromise.  

Both South and North Vietnam viewed these developments with alarm, despite efforts by the Americans and the Chinese to ease suspicions of betrayal among their allies. Thieu feared that the Americans would sell out South Vietnam in its desire to build a strategic partnership with China, telling his advisers, ‘America has been looking for a better mistress and now Nixon has discovered China. He does not want to have his old mistress hanging around. Vietnam has become old and ugly.’ Thieu sent a number of envoys to Washington in the fall of 1971 in an effort to dissuade the administration from linking the war in Vietnam to the improvement of Sino-American relations. But increasingly certain that the Nixon administration would compromise on the terms of a peace settlement, he also pushed for ever greater amounts of aid and equipment for the South Vietnamese army. As the North Vietnamese became aware of the possibility of Sino-American rapprochement, they immediately noted a change in Chinese attitudes towards negotiation. At a meeting in September 1970 between Mao and the Vietnamese prime minister, Pham Van Dong, in Beijing, one quite different in tone from the earlier Sino-Vietnamese encounter in fall 1968, Mao said, ‘I see that you can conduct the diplomatic struggle and you do it well. Negotiations have been going on for two years. At first we were a little worried that you were trapped. We are no longer worried.’ Suspicious that geostategic interests would again trump ideological fraternity as they had at Geneva in 1954, Hanoi unsuccessfully urged both the Soviets and the Chinese to disavow closer relations with the United States throughout 1971. When the Chinese began to urge North Vietnam to withdraw their demand for Thieu’s removal from office to jump-start the Paris negotiations, Hanoi officials, like their counterparts in Saigon, began to extract as much economic and military support as they could from both Moscow and Beijing in case the flow of aid was later turned off. The pay-off for these efforts was substantial. Although Soviet and Chinese support for the North never reached the levels it was at in 1967, Soviet air missile systems, arms, petroleum, and other military supplies sent to Vietnam jumped from an estimated $70 million in 1970 to $100 million in 1971. Chinese
supplies of ammunition, radio transmitters, tanks, and military trucks also doubled in that same period.\textsuperscript{24}

Under increasing diplomatic pressure from their allies, the North Vietnamese wanted to come to the bargaining table in Paris in the strongest possible position on the battlefield. To do so Hanoi launched the Easter Offensive in late March 1972. Military planners did not anticipate a full-scale rout of the American and South Vietnamese forces, but they sought to demonstrate the continuing weakness of the ARVN and to stabilize and deepen the territory under NLF control. The timing of the offensive between Mao and Nixon's February meeting and the Soviet–American summit in May, along with the fact that the North provided little information about its military planning to the Soviets and Chinese, also suggested that Hanoi was as determined to use the offensive to show its resolve to Beijing and Moscow as it was to the United States.\textsuperscript{35} The offensive struck in three directions: across the demilitarized zone that separated North and South Vietnam, along the Cambodian border, and in the central highlands. Unlike Tet, it was North Vietnamese rather than NLF forces that did the bulk of the fighting through relatively conventional battles. With strong support from American airpower, the ARVN was able to blunt the offensive's reach, suggesting that some progress had been made through Vietnamization. Casualties were high on both sides, but northern losses of some 100,000 would set back the North's offensive capacity for several years. By the end of the offensive, however, the northern leadership held more southern territory than they did before it began, including control of half of the four northernmost provinces of South Vietnam as well as territory along the Cambodian and Lao borders and the central coast. The Easter Offensive also allowed the NLF to make renewed inroads into the countryside and further destabilized southern Vietnamese society. As many as 25,000 civilians were killed, and 1 million displaced persons further crowded already burgeoning refugee camps and urban centers, where conditions remained difficult. An ARVN soldier recalled that his unit felt 'impending doom' after the Easter Offensive: 'We all believed we had fought heroically... but that our best was not good enough. The Communists simply replaced their losses and continued to march on.'\textsuperscript{26}

Nixon was enraged by the Easter Offensive and in May 1972 ordered the most drastic escalation of the war since the introduction of American ground forces in 1965. To signal continuing American resolve to the North Vietnamese and support for its allies in the South, he began one of the war's most sustained and expansive bombing campaigns of the North, placed mines in the harbour of northern port city of Haiphong, and initiated a naval blockade in a combined effort known as Linebacker I. 'The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time,' Nixon told his advisers.\textsuperscript{27} He also hoped to send a message to the Soviets and the Chinese that they needed to put additional pressure on Hanoi to compromise in the Paris peace negotiations. Soviet and Chinese responses to Linebacker, despite the fact that several of their ships were bombed and Premier Kosygin was in Hanoi at the height of the bombing, were relatively muted. Both Soviet and Chinese representatives urged the Vietnamese to return to the negotiating table, suggesting to the North Vietnamese that their overriding interest in détente and rapprochement continued to take precedence over ideological solidarity.\textsuperscript{28}

The fall of 1972 did bring a diplomatic breakthrough in the stalled negotiations. North Vietnamese demands for a ceasefire in place, meaning northern troops could remain in the South after the settlement, and US insistence that the Thieu government remain in power had been the major obstacles to an agreement. In secret negotiations between the US and North Vietnam conducted outside the formal Paris negotiating framework, the Americans agreed to the complete withdrawal of US forces, accepted a ceasefire in place for all Vietnamese forces, and endorsed the creation of a tripartite electoral commission in which the Thieu government would have equal representation along with the NLF's Provisional Revolutionary Government and a neutralist grouping. For its part, North Vietnam withdrew opposition to allowing the Thieu government to remain in power until the elections provided for in the peace accord had taken place.
Nguyen Van Thieu was outraged by the agreement, convinced that it provided the means for the North to overthrow his government, and he refused to lend his support to it. He also feared that American agreement to the tripartite electoral commission represented a substantial weakening of US support for his government. Thieu told the Americans, 'If we accept the document as it stands, we will commit suicide—and I will be committing suicide,' and demanded major changes including the withdrawal of all North Vietnamese forces from the South. To placate Thieu, the Nixon administration returned to the negotiating table and asked for a series of sixty-nine concessions, most of them minor but some designed to provide for at least a token withdrawal of northern forces from the South and to weaken the NLF's political status in the post-settlement period. North Vietnamese officials, furious at the US effort to reopen negotiations, rejected the American proposal out of hand and raised their own series of demands, including a return to their earlier insistence that the Thieu government could not remain in power in the transition to elections. Hanoi was in part under significant pressure from the NLF, who were as unhappy as Thieu was with the provisions of the accords (and had as little voice as Thieu did in their negotiation) as they believed it gave South Vietnam power of veto over the democratic transition and did not adequately provide for the release of NLF cadres in South Vietnamese jails.

With the Paris negotiations at stalemate, Nixon again launched a fierce bombing campaign against North Vietnam to demonstrate continuing support for Thieu and his resolve against Hanoi. Linebacker II, better known as the Christmas bombings of 1972, was a twelve-day assault in which the Americans dropped 36,000 tons of bombs, an amount that exceeded in tonnage all the bombs the US had used in the American war from 1969 to 1971. Typical of these savage attacks, seventy-two US bombers hit Hanoi on the night of 29 December from four different directions, while eighteen bombers dropped their loads on the rail centre north of the city and an additional thirty bombers struck Haiphong. Nixon indicated he would stop the bombing if the North Vietnamese agreed to return to the negotiating table. Although the Soviets and Chinese strongly condemned the bombing, they again pressured Hanoi towards a settlement. Having exhausted the stock of Soviet surface-to-air missiles critical for their defence against the American bombing at the end of December, North Vietnam acquiesced.

The North Vietnamese and the United States did agree to a peace settlement in January 1973. Nixon later insisted that Hanoi signed the agreement only because of the Christmas bombing. But in truth the final agreement signed in Paris was little different from the text of the accords both sides had agreed to the previous fall, suggesting that the massive bombings had no substantive impact on the actual terms of the agreement. The accords did bring the end of direct American military intervention in Vietnam, with the last US troops departing from South Vietnam in March 1973. But not only did the peace agreement outline a very fuzzy mechanism for political transition in South Vietnam, its recognition of a ceasefire in place for northern troops already in the South, what contemporary observers called the 'leopard-spot peace', was an inherently unstable arrangement. Under strong American pressure Thieu let it be known he would not oppose the settlement, but his private commitment to what throughout the peace negotiations he had very publicly termed the 'Four Noes'—no neutrality, no coalition government, no concession of southern territory to North Vietnam, and no communist activity in South Vietnam—did not bode well for its implementation.

Scholars have long debated Nixon's larger motivations for supporting the Paris peace accords, with some contending that he looked for no more than a 'decency interval' between the withdrawal of American forces and a likely northern victory over South Vietnam, while others argued that Nixon knew he had negotiated a faulty peace but aimed for an indefinite stalemate in which American airpower would underlie a 'permanent war' to protect the South from a decisive northern attack. In fact, the peace quickly unravelled, with both sides blaming each other for the renewed outbreaks of fighting in the South and the inability to move towards a political settlement. Events on the ground in
Vietnam, both the continuing instabilities of the Thieu government and North Vietnamese resolution to launch a final decisive offensive, along with Nixon's own ignominious departure from the American political stage, soon made US intentions about the peace beside the point.

The End of the Line

Along with the leopard-spot peace, the withdrawal of US forces severely weakened the already fragile South Vietnamese state. Its effect on the urban southern economy was immediate. Not only were US troops gone by the end of March 1973, but most of the military support personnel and the large American construction firms that had built much of the infrastructure of South Vietnam soon departed as well. US military aid dropped from $2.3 billion in 1973 to $1 billion in 1974, and the $400 million the US had annually spent in South Vietnam ceased altogether. At the same time, the impact of the international oil crisis began to throw the world economy in disarray when Arab oil-producing states in the Middle East significantly increased the price of crude oil. The economic effects of the oil crisis were global, but along with the substantial reductions in US aid they further weakened the southern Vietnamese economy, with inflation reaching 90 per cent and 3–4 million people unemployed. Corruption, which had been endemic in South Vietnam since the beginning of the American war, reached new levels as the economy soured and it prompted renewed political instability. For the first time, Thieu began to lose the support of some of the South's most vocal anti-communists, including Catholic political parties, which launched a big anti-corruption campaign against the Thieu government in 1974. Buddhist groups, which had been relatively quiet politically since the late 1960s, viewed Thieu's regime with increasing disdain and renewed their agitation for peace and reconciliation. As in the past, political protesters were quickly jailed. A war-weary South Vietnamese population became ever more uncertain about the future.\[3\]

Thieu believed he could weather these domestic storms because he assumed South Vietnam retained the support of the Nixon administration. After the Easter Offensive, Nixon had sent Thieu a series of secret letters promising the full support of the United States against any substantial renewed North Vietnamese military effort in the South. In pushing Thieu to drop his objections to the Paris accords in January 1973, Nixon renewed his pledge, telling him in one top-secret letter: 'You have my assurance of continued assistance in the post-settlement period and that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by the North Vietnamese.'\[34\] Thieu viewed these repeated assurances as a kind of security blanket. But political events in the US in 1973 and 1974 called into question Nixon's commitment in a way that Thieu apparently did not fully understand. In July 1973 the extent of the secret bombing of Cambodia emerged in US Senate hearings. It shocked and outraged members of Congress and much of the general public. The details of the Watergate scandal and other Nixon era abuses of power were becoming better known that summer as well. By late 1973 Nixon's public approval ratings were at an all-time low and left him fighting a desperate rearguard action to save his political life. The US Congress passed the War Powers Act in November 1973 in a direct response to what it saw as the improper use of presidential authority by Nixon in Cambodia. Strengthening the role of Congress in overseeing the war-making capacity of the president, the new law made it less likely that Thieu would be able to count on the kind of American support Nixon had promised him. And in August 1974 the Watergate scandal forced President Nixon to resign.

With Nixon gone, the dissidence and misperceptions only increased for Nguyen Van Thieu. When Nixon's vice-president, Gerald R. Ford, assumed the presidency, Ford continued to make pledges of support to South Vietnam, although he was unaware of the scope of the secret promises Nixon had made earlier. But Thieu apparently believed that Nixon and Ford were making the same expansive guarantees of US assistance. Moreover, his perceptual blinders meant Thieu did not fully understand the impact of
resurgent Congressional authority in US foreign policy-making and the reticence of Congressional leaders to undertake further involvement in Vietnam. He assumed the American legislature worked like that of South Vietnam, where the executive had little if any need for legislative approval. As a result, Thieu made few sustained contingency plans, believing that in the eleventh hour the United States would come to his aid if necessary. As it happened, the eleventh hour was fast approaching.

That a major northern military offensive would eventually come, given the persisting armed skirmishes between Hanoi and Saigon and the determination of North Vietnam, was no surprise. But the losses the North had incurred during the Easter Offensive and its uncertainties about the kinds of military support South Vietnam might continue to receive from the United States prompted the North Vietnamese to move cautiously. The Hanoi leadership believed it would take two years of planning and preparation to launch a successful final offensive in 1976. Throughout 1974 over 10,000 North Vietnamese troops were detailed to build more than 16,000 miles of roads that could deliver equipment for a future offensive. At the same time North Vietnamese and NLF troops in the South began making substantial inroads against South Vietnamese forces in the central highlands and the Mekong delta far more quickly than many in the northern leadership had anticipated. When PAVN and PLAF troops gained control of two provincial capitals near the Cambodian border in late 1974, and the United States did not intervene in substantial ways to support the South Vietnamese, Hanoi approved an offensive to take Ban Me Tuot, the largest city in the central highlands, with its regular main-force units.

Largely using PAVN main-force units, the attack on Ban Me Tuot began on 10 March. Two days later the city fell to northern forces. Within another week, six provinces in the central highlands were under northern control, and Hanoi ordered PAVN to turn its attention to the central coast with the aim of taking Hue and Danang. In mid-March the United States decided to evacuate its consular personnel from Danang, setting off a panic among southern civilians, many of whom were now convinced the United States intended to abandon South Vietnam and that a North Vietnamese victory might be imminent. As many as a million civilians made a chaotic and panicky trek south, increasing the already substantial logistical difficulties for ARVN officers, who had been ordered to get reinforcements up to Danang from Saigon to confront the communist advances. Hue and Danang were captured by PAVN forces in late March.

The speed of the South Vietnamese government’s collapse in central Vietnam surprised Hanoi officials, but they quickly readjusted their calendar for victory. On the final day of March the leadership ordered its southern military commanders to begin a general offensive against Saigon, dubbed the Ho Chi Minh Campaign: ‘Strategically, militarily and politically, we now possess overwhelmingly superior strength and the enemy is on the verge of disintegration. The United States appears virtually powerless, and even reinforcements cannot reverse the enemy’s situation…. From this moment, the final strategic decisive battle of our army and people has begun.’ In this final hour, Thieu continued to hope that the United States would come to the rescue of South Vietnam. Just before the fall of Ban Me Tuot, the US Congress had rejected President Ford’s request for additional military aid for South Vietnam. Thieu made a last-minute appeal to the Americans in early April. The Ford administration, many of whom believed the cause was lost and opposed the further use of American airpower in Vietnam, agreed to seek $700 million in emergency aid. Congress again rejected the measure.

On 21 April, Thieu resigned as the president of South Vietnam. Chaos ensued in Saigon as the United States ordered the evacuation of all US personnel. Many southern Vietnamese with connections to the Americans, fearful of their treatment after the northern victory, desperately sought exit visas and a berth on US ships and helicopters. Images of US Marines using rifle butts to keep the Vietnamese from grabbing the skids of helicopters or of angry South Vietnamese soldiers firing on departing Americans formed the final tableau of the American war and the US–South
Vietnamese relationship. Meanwhile, North Vietnamese and NLF forces drew ever closer to Saigon. They reached the city, now quiet, on 30 April 1975. About noon, a North Vietnamese tank crashed through the presidential palace to take the final surrender of the South Vietnamese state.

After War

Three decades of war against the French and the Americans were at an end. Like the French before them, the massive American military intervention ended in defeat. The North had won. The South Vietnamese state was quickly no more than a memory. From the perspective of the North, however, the wars for Vietnam had always been about more than national liberation. Its twin goal was the socialist transformation of state and society. As one war came to an end, another began. But in this one the North Vietnamese leadership was unable to replicate battlefield successes: its ability to impose a socialist vision on a reunified southern and northern Vietnam proved to be elusive.

Surprised by the speed of the northern victory, Hanoi did not initially have a fully formed conception of how it would integrate the southern economy and society with that of the North. A go-slow policy that delayed formal reunification and permitted some free-market economic activity shaped initial post-war policy. But in July 1976 the country formally became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with many of the most prominent members of the National Liberation Front pushed aside in favour of a government headed by the Hanoi leadership, who had crafted the final victory in the American war. In part because of shortages of experienced southern-born NLF cadres, northerners were sent down to oversee the regional and local government in the South and their presence was often resented by the southern population. Several hundred thousand southerners were sent to re-education camps, largely those associated with the former South Vietnamese state and military whom the regime believed to be politically unreliable. Many others were under continual surveillance and denied employment because of their backgrounds. More surprisingly some members of the NLF whose ideological and class identities were seen as a danger to the establishment of the new regime were also put into camps. Conditions in the re-education camps were primitive and sometimes brutal, though the southern 'bloodbath' in the wake of the communist victory that American and South Vietnamese officials had predicted never occurred.

In a broader sense, the new regime was keen to root out what it termed 'bourgeois' attitudes and quickly transformed the southern education system and curriculum along northern socialist models. Concerned about southern religious institutions, especially Vietnamese Catholics, who had been among the most loyal supporters of the South Vietnamese regime, the new regime sought to control Catholic, Buddhist, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and other organized expressions of religious faith. Officials also began to attack 'the civilization of the dollar' (văn minh của đồng đeo la), which they believed had corroded wartime social values in South Vietnam. One campaign banned the playing of 'yellow music' (nhạc vàng), especially love songs like those of Trịnh Công Sơn (who himself was briefly sent to a post-war re-education camp) so popular in the South during the American war, because they evoked 'in hapless listeners a gloomy, embittered, impotent and cynical mood towards life, an attitude negating youth's desire to be cheerful, a sensation of being drowned in loneliness in a withered and desolate world'.

These political changes were soon accompanied by a dramatic shift in economic policy. The war-ravaged Vietnamese economy suffered from low agricultural and industrial output, high unemployment, and, in the South, rampant inflation. Faced with an extremely harsh post-war economic embargo by the United States that was honoured by most of the developed world and by limited economic assistance from the socialist world, Vietnam was largely on its own to deal with these serious economic problems. In the immediate aftermath of the war, a few major industries and utilities were taken over by the state and the property of some wealthy business people confiscated, but middle-class southerners were encouraged to continue their economic activities. Household agricultural production