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The Vietnam Wars, Section 9

The Negotiations

For a long time, the negotiations went nowhere. The diplomats spent months simply arguing over the shape of the negotiating table. The US wanted to have two sides: US and Saigon on one side, Communists on the other. The Communists wanted to have four sides: 1) the US, 2) Republic of Vietnam (the Saigon government), 3) the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the Hanoi government), and 4) the guerrilla movement in South Vietnam which had originally called itself the National Liberation Front and was by this time calling itself the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). Many people have criticized this as a remarkable piece of stupidity, a case of diplomats wasting time on trivialities. They are mistaken; the debate over the shape of the negotiating table was perfectly rational.

The US wanted a peace settlement in which the Saigon government would win full control of South Vietnam. If this happened the PRG, and the South Vietnamese Communist apparatus which formed the guiding core of the PRG, would be wiped from the face of the earth. What the US wanted was, in effect, an agreement under which the North Vietnamese Communists would sell out their southern comrades. The PRG was not likely to approve of any such agreement. As long as the North Vietnamese were demanding that the PRG have its own separate delegation at the conference and speak for itself, rather than being included in a combined Communist delegation where the North Vietnamese could speak for it, it was obvious that the North Vietnamese were not willing to sign an agreement satisfactory to the US. On the other side, the Communists were determined to get an agreement that would bring South Vietnam under Communist rule. If the US were not even willing to have a separate delegation of South Vietnamese Communists at the conference, the US was obviously not willing to sign any such agreement. It would have made no sense for either side to accept the other's view as to proper shape of the conference table and then expect anything useful to come out of the conference. A compromise was finally reached involving one large circular table and two smaller rectangular ones, arranged in a way that the United States could interpret as representing a two-sided negotiation, and the Communists could interpret as representing a four-sided negotiation.

The problem was that there was no real possibility of compromise. Both sides talked about peaceful political settlements, but in fact there was no way the Communist organization and the Saigon government could ever get along peacefully together within South Vietnam; they were going to go on trying to destroy one another until one or the other succeeded.

From 1968 until at least 1971 and perhaps 1972, the balance of power of power was shifting in favor of the US and the ARVN. The losses suffered in the Tet Offensive had weakened the South Vietnamese Communist apparatus considerably, and steady pounding by the US and the ARVN weakened it still further in the following years. The area controlled by Saigon increased. Communist political organizers in many villages were captured or killed by the "Phoenix Program." As the South Vietnamese Communist organization suffered increasing losses, more and more key positions came to be occupied by North Vietnamese. In short, the political links between the Communist organization and the South Vietnamese peasants, relatively strong in 1967, had been much weakened by 1971. The Saigon government gained in strength at the same time. It is a gross exaggeration to say, however (as some authors do) that the South Vietnamese Communists were effectively destroyed as a result of the Tet Offensive, and ceased to play any important role in the war.

While the Viet Cong (the South Vietnamese Communist forces) had been seriously weakened, the North Vietnamese had not been weakened to nearly so great an extent, while the unpopularity of the war

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in the US was forcing the US government to pull out more and more of its forces. While this was occurring, the morale and the competence of many US units declined seriously. Stories about soldiers using drugs, and sometimes murdering their commanding officers, further reduced the enthusiasm of the American public, while loss of public support for the war was in turn part of the reason for the low morale in combat units.

By the spring of 1972 the US was hardly participating in ground combat at all. A major Communist offensive in the spring of 1972 (the "Easter Offensive"), was carried out much more by the North Vietnamese, and less by the PRG, than the Tet Offensive of 1968. This fact reflected the extent to which the South Vietnamese Communist organization had been weakened in the intervening period. The Saigon Government managed to weather this offensive, with US air support, but it was weakened substantially. It is fairly clear that the PRG forces had stopped shrinking and started to grow again by 1972, and there are some indications that they had started to grow as early as 1971, when the amount of combat being conducted by US ground troops dropped to near-negligible levels. The balance of power had not shifted nearly enough for either side to be forced to give in to the other on the fundamental issue of the war: who would control South Vietnam. And, as has been noted above, no genuine compromise was possible on this issue. However, the war was causing severe hardship for all of the major participants, and there was increasing political pressure for some kind of settlement. Finally, in January 1973, the peace negotiations in Paris produced an agreement of sorts. The main points of the Paris Peace Accord were:

1. There was to be a cease-fire in place; both sides would stop shooting and, until some final settlement could be reached, they would control the territory they controlled at the time the agreement went into effect.
2. All prisoners of war were to be released.
3. All US forces would pull out of Vietnam, and take their weapons and equipment with them.
4. North Vietnamese infiltration of men and supplies through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam was to cease.
5. The future of South Vietnam would be settled through peaceful political means.

In one sense, this agreement was a joke. Neither side had any intention of obeying it. It did not settle the question of who would end up controlling South Vietnam; it left that up to the result of future political processes.

For Hanoi and the PRG, the Paris Agreement was an opportunity. Militarily it was greatly to their benefit; it required the US to pull out of South Vietnam but did not require North Vietnamese troops to do so. Politically it also looked good to them. They were not as popular as they once had been, but they still had a considerable degree of popular support, more internal unity than the anti-Communist forces, and more skilled political organizers than the anti-Communist forces. If despite these advantages they still lost a peaceful political competition, they could always pick up their guns again and resume fighting. In short, the clauses of the Paris Agreement calling for a restoration of normal political processes could not harm the Communists and might well benefit them. They were appropriately enthusiastic about these clauses.

The President of the Republic of Vietnam, General Thieu, was frightened by this agreement, and signed it very unwillingly. He had no confidence in his ability to survive a peaceful political competition in South Vietnam. He did not have great political skill, and he was not tremendously popular even among the non-Communist elements of the population. Free elections would offer the Communists a magnificent opportunity to play off different factions in Saigon against one another. If genuinely free election were held the Communists might not win a majority, but there was hardly any possibility that Thieu would win a majority, and if he tried peaceful political competition, lost, and tried to resume fighting, he could expect that his position would have been seriously weakened by squabbling between different anti-Communist factions in Saigon during the period of peaceful politics.

On the other hand, Thieu could not beat the Communists on the battlefield without American support.

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From his point of view, the best thing that could happen would be for the cease-fire to break down quickly and for the US forces to return to Vietnam.

What the United States got out of the agreement was, essentially, a way out of Vietnam. US forces were withdrawn, US casualties ceased, and the Americans who had been taken prisoner during the war were released. The US retained very limited influence over the course of events in Vietnam. When US forces pulled out they left behind a situation in which the combined strength of the Communist forces in Vietnam (North and South) was considerably greater than the strength of the Saigon government. At the time the agreement was signed, President Nixon was hoping to be able to use the threat of renewed US participation in the war to persuade the Communists not to exploit their superior strength, but Nixon's decline and fall over the following months deprived this threat of any credibility.

When the agreement supposedly went into effect, the actual results were:

Almost all US military personnel were withdrawn; a few were put in civilian clothes and continued to serve in Vietnam, in non-combat roles. However, instead of taking all their equipment with them, the US forces gave much of it to the Saigon government, and then explained that since it no longer belonged to the US, the Paris Agreement did not require the US to withdraw it.

The Communists utterly ignored the requirement that they cease infiltrating men and supplies from the North to the South via Laos and Cambodia. On the contrary, they expanded their transportation network in Laos and Cambodia very substantially, creating by 1974 a larger infiltration capacity than they had ever had before.

The shooting did not stop for so much as a single day. Most combat incidents in the first few months after the supposed cease-fire were initiated by the ARVN, which wanted to take as much territory as possible before the Communists could rebuild their forces too much.

The processes for a political settlement of South Vietnam's future that had been specified in the Paris Agreement were blocked by the Thieu Administration in Saigon.

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