HOW TO END A WAR

America’s exit from Vietnam should not be our template in Afghanistan.

By George J. Veith

As the role of U.S. ground forces in Afghanistan ends, the nation’s future remains cloudy. Can Afghan military forces maintain security throughout the country? Will there be a diplomatic pact that enables the Taliban to participate in the political process? How much U.S. aid and ongoing training will be required to support the Afghan government and military? If a decade of war and thousands of American casualties mean anything, these and many other questions will continue to confront U.S. military and political leaders.

The events leading to the signing of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords that ended the war in Vietnam, and the results that followed, offer lessons that U.S. leaders can draw upon today. While the conclusion of the Iraq war was relatively seamless, Vietnam was anything but. In the years leading up to the Paris accords, direct negotiations with Hanoi’s leaders by both the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon administrations – including secret talks begun by Nixon’s national security adviser, Henry Kissinger – had failed. As prerequisites for any peace accord, the North Vietnamese had demanded the removal of President Nguyen Van Thieu’s government in Saigon and the withdrawal of all U.S. forces. Hanoi believed that without U.S. support, the “puppets” in Saigon would quickly collapse.

Since Nixon refused to accede to what was essentially a disguised surrender, he sought to end the war through a mixture of various strategies. First was “Vietnamization” – withdrawing U.S. forces while strengthening the South Vietnamese military so they could assume the brunt of the war. Second, both Nixon and Kissinger sought to separate the military issues from South Vietnam’s future political makeup. Third was detente with the Soviet Union and China. Nixon hoped to convince these patrons of North Vietnam to pressure Hanoi into ending the war; in return, they would receive reduced tensions with the United States and possible economic benefits.

Unfortunately, Nixon’s policy foundered upon Hanoi’s intransigence. Yet in March 1972, a new opportunity arose. Believing that the U.S. military pullout had left the South Vietnamese badly weakened, North Vietnam gambled on a massive military assault to conquer its enemy. Called the “Easter Offensive” by the United States, Hanoi threw most of its army into battle, seeking either a complete victory or the creation of a coalition government. Nixon sensed that if the allies could beat back the invasion, that defeat might finally compel Hanoi to negotiate an end to the war. When the North Vietnamese army, backed by copious U.S. firepower, held its ground and inflicted severe casualties on Hanoi’s troops, Nixon was proven correct. The communist military defeat convinced Hanoi’s leadership to find a diplomatic solution. In early October 1972, Hanoi conceded on one of its key demands, announcing that it would agree to allow the Thieu government to remain in power after the signing of a cease-fire agreement. This political compromise, despite disputes between the United States and North Vietnam in November and December, eventually led to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973.

Although Kissinger had kept Thieu informed of the progress of the negotiations, the South Vietnamese had not been involved in the secret talks. Once he’d struck a deal with the North Vietnamese, he traveled to Saigon in October 1972 to brief Thieu on the draft agreement. The U.S. government quickly discovered that it would now have as much difficulty concluding the pact with Saigon as it had with Hanoi. When Thieu learned that the agreement did not require the North Vietnamese to withdraw their troops from South Vietnam (which Hanoi refused to do), he bitterly opposed it. From mid-October 1972 until mid-January 1973, he fought ferociously to amend the proposed accord. Acrimonious disagreement over Thieu’s demands nearly caused a rupture between the two allies.

Attempting to mollify Thieu, Nixon sent Kissinger back to Paris in November and December to renegotiate certain sections of the accords. Hanoi balked at Thieu’s demands, and the talks broke down. Nixon, frustrated at what he perceived as communist stalling, commenced a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam on Dec. 18, 1972. By the end of December, Hanoi and the United States had agreed to resume negotiations. Kissinger managed to modify the agreement in several places, but on the all-important issue of North Vietnamese troop withdrawals, Hanoi still refused. In mid-January 1973, with the accords concluded for a second time, Thieu also acquiesced, but only in response to a combination of heavy U.S. pressure and secret guarantees. Nixon had threatened to cut off all military and economic aid if Thieu refused to sign the agreement (which would have been essentially a death blow to South Vietnam), but secretly promised to maintain aid and respond militarily if the communists launched another major offensive.

On April 21, 1975, North Vietnamese forces launched rockets at Saigon, striking the town center and setting fire to 100 wooden houses. Fourteen people were killed and more than 40 injured in the attacks. (Left)
The peace accords had several critical sections that, if properly implemented, would have led to a lasting peace in Southeast Asia. All three parties agreed to a cease-fire, the release of prisoners, the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces, and a halt to infiltration of North Vietnamese men and war materiel into South Vietnam.

On paper, the accords essentially achieved Nixon’s main strategy: U.S. forces would be withdrawn, the South Vietnamese military had been built up, and the Russians and the Chinese were engaged in ending the war. The military issues (for a time) were solved, while the political issue would be turned into a debate between the Vietnamese. By March 1973, the two Vietnamese parties were engaged in negotiations in Paris. However, those talks led nowhere. Although Saigon offered several formulas for elections, Hanoi repeatedly refused.

Worse, the cease-fire immediately broke down. Fighting raged across South Vietnam as both sides jockeyed to gain additional territory. Further, despite the communists’ assurances that they would honor the accords, they immediately broke their word. They continued their infiltration into South Vietnam, refused to withdraw troops from Laos and Cambodia, and stymied U.S. efforts to learn the fates of American MIAs. The South Vietnamese implemented the accords only grudgingly, violating the cease-fire themselves and dragging their heels on releasing some high-ranking civilian communist prisoners.

Despite the ongoing communist violations, Congress passed a law prohibiting all direct U.S. combat involvement in Southeast Asia, including air support. Moreover, Congress, unaware of Nixon’s secret promises, dramatically cut military aid to South Vietnam. Just as devastating, but often overlooked, was the concurrent cutback in U.S. economic aid. That loss of economic support, combined with the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the oil crisis and the worldwide economic doldrums, sent the South Vietnamese economy into a depression. Emboldened by our retreat, and well aware of the erosion of South Vietnamese combat power and morale, North Vietnam launched another massive military invasion in March 1975. Scenes of fleeing refugees filled U.S. TV screens. On the last day, as North Vietnamese troops closed in on Saigon, panicking South Vietnamese besieged the locked gates of the U.S. Embassy while helicopters flew American personnel out to waiting ships.

These scenes now symbolize America’s worst foreign-policy disaster of the 20th century. The postwar catastrophe in Vietnam was equally horrific. Our South Vietnamese allies were crowded into brutal prison camps while thousands of refugees fled the country in rickety ships, earning the nickname “boat people.” The subsequent “Vietnam syndrome” that paralyzed U.S. policymakers for a decade, the second-guessing from our allies regarding America’s staying power and the rise in Soviet adventurism in the Third World can all be traced to our defeat in South Vietnam.

Preventing a second such nightmare in Afghanistan is crucial. A poorly planned U.S. withdrawal could pave the way for a Taliban victory, which would surely lead to similar appalling reprisals and hordes of desperate people seeking to escape. A precipitous collapse of Afghanistan would also leave a permanent scar on the American public and policy-level opinion, and would undoubtedly embolden our enemies into escalating their efforts against not only U.S. but all Western interests.

Does the Nixon administration’s plan to use detente, Vietnamization, and separation of the military and political issues to end the Vietnam War provide a game plan for Afghanistan? I believe so. But which lessons are critical, which mistakes must we avoid, and which successes should we try to replicate? While there are striking similarities between the two situations, there are also enormous differences, such as the impact of religion and ethnicity on the conflict. The key, then, is to mitigate the problems while learning from the triumphs to prevent the collapse of Afghanistan.

Nixon’s initial plan was to withdraw the United States from the conflict while ensuring the survival of the South Vietnamese government. Although he publicly tied U.S. troop withdrawals to improvements in South Vietnamese military capacities, domestic considerations – budget issues and anti-war protests – also played a huge role. The Nixon administration was under tremendous pressure to end the war, and by 1971 it had announced a major change in its negotiation offer. Kissinger broadcast that the United States would no longer demand that North Vietnamese troops withdraw concurrently with U.S. troops. Moreover, Hanoi realized the importance the United States placed upon recovering its POWs. It was able to leverage that desire to force the United States to completely remove all its combat forces without having to withdraw its own. This departure of U.S. military units, firepower and advisers created a sense of abandonment among the South
Vietnamese that the communists fully exploited. With the Americans gone, the South Vietnamese desperately short of supplies and communist units entrenched in South Vietnam, Hanoi could not pass up such a tempting opportunity.

Since President Barack Obama has already announced his intention to withdraw U.S. troops, that card is off the table. However, reports indicate that he intends to leave at least one combat brigade, along with Special Forces and drones. A continuing U.S. combat presence will enable ongoing training and improvement for the Afghan military. More importantly, it will provide much-needed psychological support for the Afghan people and government, demonstrating that they have not been abandoned to the tender mercies of the Taliban. But whispers of a “zero option” – no U.S. troops on the ground – have been circulating. Most likely a trial balloon released by White House staffers, these should be swiftly shot down. A total withdrawal of U.S. troops, including training personnel and Special Forces, would only plant the seeds for more war, not compel the Taliban to seek a diplomatic solution.

Currently, the Afghan situation appears to be stuck in a pattern comparable to Vietnam before the “Easter Offensive.” Training and expansion of the Afghan military and police continue. U.S. forces are beginning their withdrawal, even though there have been no signs of a diplomatic breakthrough. Scattered press reports indicate that there have been some efforts to negotiate with the Taliban, but such diplomacy has been inconclusive. Like the communists in Vietnam, the Taliban do not consider their opposite number – President Hamid Karzai’s government – legitimate. They refuse to meet with Karzai’s High Peace Council, a body he created specifically to confer with them.

However, the Taliban are not the North Vietnamese army. They do not have the heavy weapons or largess of two huge patrons supplying them with weapons and food. What the two do have in common is fanaticism, a supply chain difficult to interdict (the Ho Chi Minh Trail and opium sales), sanctuaries to strike from, and a well-known penchant for using terror to achieve their aims. Given the Taliban’s ability to exert an insurgency, this again argues for keeping a modicum of U.S. combat power in Afghanistan.

Because of their lack of heavy weapons, the Taliban have not attempted any countrywide offensives to win the war. They instead follow the revolutionary guidebook: guerrilla warfare, spectacular terrorist strikes and retreat to safe havens. Thus they have not suffered a dramatic battlefield defeat that might force them to the negotiating table. Their main stratagem now appears to be to wait us out. Perhaps, like the leaders in Hanoi, they believe that once we depart their enemy will quickly crumble. The Obama administration must ensure that the Taliban do not interpret U.S. withdrawal as an opportunity to strike, as Hanoi did in 1972. Much will depend on how the Taliban perceive the strength and morale of the Afghan National Army and U.S. willingness to reinteview, assuming religious fervor does not prevail over rational minds.
Since the Taliban claim they will not speak with the Karzai government, should the United States attempt to negotiate a Paris-style peace agreement with the Taliban without Kabul’s participation? The answer is no, and for a variety of reasons. First, Karzai has publicly stated that any peace talks should be only between the Taliban and his government. Second, the results in Vietnam demonstrate the dangers of U.S. diplomats’ concluding a peace agreement on behalf of our allies without their active participation.

Given the difficulties that arose between Saigon and Washington over the October 1972 draft, and since South Vietnam’s violent end set the stage for postwar charges of abandonment and recriminations about arranging a “decent interval” (a period after the departure so that the United States could not be blamed for Saigon’s fall), we should refrain from trying to arrange such a concord. Plus, this will degrade one of the Taliban’s most important propaganda claims: that Karzai is a U.S. “puppet” and hence illegitimate. Hanoi pressed the same misinformation about Thieu, much to its benefit. With U.S. forces remaining in country, this propaganda line will not be totally rebuffed, but it will certainly prove much less powerful.

Unlike Nixon, Obama is under no pressure to reach a Paris-style accord. With only one American POW currently held by the Taliban, the administration should move swiftly to negotiate a swap for his release. If there are no Americans being held hostage, and without the kind of vociferous anti-war pressure Nixon faced, the Taliban hold no leverage over U.S. actions other than the remaining threat to conquer Afghanistan. And the only way they could accomplish that is for the United States to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam: withdraw all combat forces, dramatically cut aid, destroy Afghan morale and thus invite a Taliban assault.

Therefore, from a posture of having resolved our military issues, we should let Kabul and the Taliban resolve their political issues. Karzai’s stated position is that the Taliban must recognize his government and lay down their arms. It is difficult to gauge whether Karzai is offering elections or a coalition government if the Taliban agree to such terms, mainly due to discord over such an offer with the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Absent a decisive military defeat or some other compelling event, it is impossible to determine whether the Taliban will ever agree to talks, let alone honor a signed agreement. But the Afghan government, after years of U.S. and international help, is now in a better position to negotiate with the Taliban than the United States, and we should let it.

That does not mean we should not help the Afghan government seek a peaceful end to the conflict. In the Vietnam analogy, Pakistan now plays the role of Russia/China, and there have been long-standing U.S. efforts to convince it to cease supporting the Taliban, but those efforts have met with mixed results. The best course is to seek Pakistan’s help in convincing the Taliban to engage in serious peace talks with the Karzai government. The message should be unambiguous: international forces are withdrawing, but the United States remains to support the Afghan people. The Taliban can join a peace process now to achieve some political voice or remain forever sidelined.

Additionally, a further message should be sent: any attempt at a massive attack after the main U.S. forces depart in hopes of toppling the Afghan government will be defeated. If such an attack is carried out, the Taliban will never be welcomed into the political process. Such a maneuver would require U.S. resolve, but it has the potential to place the Taliban in a difficult position, assuming some rationality exists in the Taliban command structure.

Our only real concerns are budgetary woes and a Congress intent on forging its own foreign policy. Congress and the Obama administration must resist the urge to slash military and economic aid or to consider a “zero option.” Afghanistan’s economy and tax system are unable at this point to support the large standing army and police forces needed to defend against continuing Taliban attacks.

The loss of South Vietnam need not be repeated in Afghanistan. The two situations are not completely similar; no two conflicts ever are. But understanding the mistakes the United States made in ending the Vietnam War can help us avoid them in Afghanistan. Given a small remaining U.S. military presence, and a continuation of aid, training and psychological support, we should be able to help that country maintain its freedom and validate the sacrifices of so many American servicemembers and civilians.

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