



Module 4 - Nixon and Vietnamization: 1968-1973

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Module 4 Learning Objectives

- Understand the basic tenets of Nixon's Vietnamization program
- Discuss how Vietnamization impacted the American war effort
- Identify the leaker of the Pentagon Papers
- Understand how the release of the Pentagon Papers impacted the way the public viewed the war
- Determine the reasons behind Nixon's resignation

Vietnamization

While Nixon was campaigning in 1968, he claimed that he had a secret plan that would end the war in Vietnam. During the campaign and election he did not reveal this secret plan but in 1969, after he had won, he introduced the plan of Vietnamization, which was simply just handing the war over to the South



Vietnamese Army and phasing out American involvement. He said that Vietnamization was “the complete withdrawal of all US combat ground forces, and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable.” Now keep this in mind – this was 1969 and while US troop numbers did begin to decline under Vietnamization, US ground troops were not fully removed from Vietnam until 1973 and the Paris Peace Accords (more about the Peace Accords in Module 5).

While Nixon was busy Vietnamizing the war, he entered into secret negotiations with North Vietnam and also began to secretly bomb suspected enemy bases in Cambodia and Laos. Interestingly, new information has just been revealed that shows that Nixon secretly sabotaged peace talks in 1968 between then president LBJ and his administration because such a large part of his campaign centered on keeping the war going so he could pitch his secret plan to end the war.

Keep in mind that this was not the first time the US attempted to Vietnamize the war – in fact the French had tried to do it during the First Indochina War, Eisenhower and JFK had tried to do it with increasing military advisors, so Nixon didn’t really have a secret plan since it had already been attempted – and it proved to be unsuccessful every time it was attempted.

Under Nixon’s plan, the US majorly increased spending for the South Vietnamese Army – including billions for machine guns, tanks, and rifles. The US also gave them 1200 airplanes -which made South Vietnam the *fourth* largest air force in the world! For a

while Vietnamization seemed to be working – but a “practice raid” for the South Vietnamese Army in Laos proved to be a disaster and showed just how unprepared the South Vietnamese Army was to take over the entire war effort.

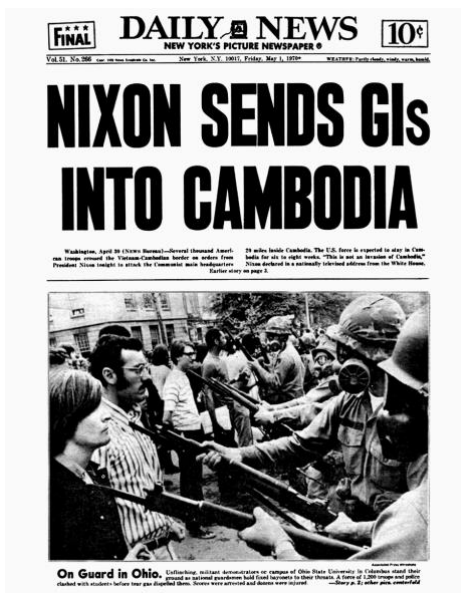
Expansion into Cambodia

Nixon focused on shutting down the supply route via Ho Chi Minh Trail, however, parts of the trail went through Cambodia – which was off limits to US soldiers. Nixon decided to bomb the trail and supply depots that held supplies destined for the Viet Cong from the North Vietnamese Army. When these raids started, Nixon kept them a secret but the

raids were ultimately unsuccessful as much of the supplies were kept underground. At the end of April, 1970, Nixon ordered US troops to invade Cambodia and he announced his intentions to the US public, which led to the Kent State massacre and demonstrations against this decision. Nixon had the support of the military government in Cambodia who had taken control of the country from Prince Sihanouk, but Nixon did not have the support of Congress or the US public.

The US invasion of Cambodia destroyed hundreds of tons of enemy supplies, but it failed in destroying the NVA and VC headquarters – which were ultimately

Nixon’s main goals. A long term result of the invasion of Cambodia was the downfall of the military government of Cambodia that had encouraged the invasion and the country was taken over by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot. One million Cambodian’s were murdered under this regime – which shows the results that can come out of military decisions.



My Lai Massacre

Some of you may have heard about the My Lai Massacre that occurred during the war. I used to show a documentary to my ground classes about it, but it appears to no longer stream online. [Here is a link to the documentary page on PBS if you want to try and hunt it down yourself.](#) Here is a brief overview of the event:

In March, 1969 Charlie Company of the Americal Division's 11th Infantry Brigade was on a search and destroy mission to destroy a local VC battalion. They entered the village of My Lai, which had around 700 civilians, and Charlie Company met no resistance from the villagers. However, soldiers began shooting the villagers and over 500 of the villagers were murdered that day. A US helicopter pilot, Hugh Thompson, was flying overhead and saw US troops committing this atrocity and he threatened to fire on the American troops. After the massacre occurred, there was an active cover up by the



military, but by November, 1969 the Secretary of the Army directed a review of the incident to review “possible suppression or withholding of information by persons involved in the incident.” Charges were filed against 28 officers and 2 NCO’s involved in the cover up. In the end, only one person was charged for this massacre and that was Lt. William Calley who was charged with murdering 104 villagers. He was sentenced to a life sentence but it was commuted by Nixon in 1974.

This event has major historical significance – first, it shows the inherent flaw with the strategy of Search and Destroy, which was the question of “who was the enemy?” And it showed the effects that come out of dehumanizing the Vietnamese people.

Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers

When I teach this class on the ground campus, I spend two class periods viewing the film “The Most Dangerous Man in America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers” which details the story of Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers. As we are not meeting as a ground class, [here is a link to this documentary](#), which is not required viewing for this module but I still encourage you to view it on your own time.



Here is some backstory on Ellsberg: He was initially very much a supporter of the war in Vietnam and was a Marine veteran. In August, 1964 during the Gulf of Tonkin incident, he began working for the Secretary of Defense and eventually worked for a think tank called the Rand Corporation and he worked closely with the Department of Defense. His views began to change on the war and he eventually decided to leak an important study conducted by the Defense Department entitled “United States – Vietnam Relations, 1945 – 1967: A Study Prepared by the Department of Defense.” This study pretty much showed that the US government was not forthright with the American public about how the war was actually going in Vietnam. Ellsberg decided to leak the study in 1971 and 17 major newspapers ran the story and leaked the information. Needless to say, Nixon was pissed! He ordered a group called The Plumbers to break into the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist in order to get information to discredit Ellsberg. This ties into the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s abuse of his power.

Watergate

This leads us to the Watergate scandal. If you have seen the film Forrest Gump, [then this clip may be familiar to you.](#)



While Watergate is not directly related to Vietnam, it was still an important presidential event that impacted the way the country viewed Nixon. Consider how this scandal escalated - it was not a scandal that played out overnight! [Click here to read a timeline on the Watergate scandal.](#)

One of the main issues revolved around the taping system Nixon had installed in the Oval Office and his refusal to release certain portions of those recordings. Eventually, it went to the Supreme Court in 1974 – [click here to read an overview of the case.](#)

Nixon eventually had to release the recordings and the Smoking Gun tape was his downfall. [Read the transcript here](#), however it's nine pages of boring reading, so I can sum it up for you here. The big deal about the tape: Nixon agrees that administration officials should approach Richard Helms (CIA director) and Vernon Walters (Deputy Director of CIA) and ask them to request that Patrick Gray (Director of FBI) to halt the Bureau's investigation into the Watergate break-in on the grounds that it was a national security matter. The special prosecutor felt that Nixon, in agreeing, had entered into a criminal conspiracy whose goal was the obstruction of justice. This was essentially obstruction of justice and was Nixon's downfall. He eventually resigned on August 8, 1974 and was succeeded by Gerald Ford. In September, 1974 Ford gave Nixon a pardon, putting an end to the Watergate affair. [Click here to listen to Nixon's resignation speech.](#) Ford later provided Nixon a pardon. [Click here to read Ford's pardon](#) which was not viewed well by the public.





Lessons of Watergate

1. The Supreme Court remained supreme. It was a unanimous decision by the Supreme Court on July 24, 1974 that effectively ended the Nixon presidency by ordering the release of the Watergate “smoking gun” tape and other recordings. The Justices held that not even the president was above the law, and it didn’t agree with Nixon’s claim of executive privilege. More importantly, the Court said, were “the fundamental demands of due process of law in the fair administration of justice.” The Court’s curb on executive power remains crucial today.

2. The Church Committee. Concerns surfaced during the Watergate hearings about the FBI investigating American citizens and others for political purposes. The claims were accelerated by a post-Watergate story from the New York Times about CIA allegations about domestic spying. The Church Committee held hearings during the post-Watergate years about these and other secret activities. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978 was an outgrowth of the committee’s investigations, and it created the special FISA court to authorize surveillance operations when driven by national security concerns.

3. An era of legal reform. The Watergate scandal shined a negative light on the legal profession. Many of the participants in the scandal were attorneys and almost 30 of them faced some type of legal proceeding. After Watergate, most law schools in the United States required courses about professional responsibility, and the American Bar Association rewrote its responsibility code.

4. The era of celebrity journalists. The sudden fame of two little-known reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, created what became known as the culture of celebrity journalists. James Fallows allegedly came up with the term in the 1980s about the growing pop-culture phenomenon of celebrity journalists who were bigger than the stories they covered. They are commonplace today in all forms of media.

5. A legacy of language. Words and sayings from Watergate are part of the common language of America, from President Nixon’s famous “I am not a crook” statement to President Ford’s declaration that “our national nightmare is over.” But nothing has been more prevalent than the use of suffix “gate” to indicate a scandal. The late William Safire,



a former Nixon speechwriter, took to using “gate” to describe scandals. By one count, more than 200 scandals have had “gate” attached to them!

What’s Next?

- Complete the Module 4 Primary Source Analysis Activity
- Complete the Module 4 Knowledge Check

Image References

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